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SCREEN



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ACTING TAPED

ANDREW HIGSON DISCUSSES A NEW PROJECT ON CINEMA PERFORMANCE WITH MARK NASH AND JAMES SWINSON

Why is it so embarrassing to see a film with English actors? British cinema would be great if we still made silent movies and no one had to speak. Once English actors speak, not only do they speak with... a class accent, but they are definitely trying to say 'I am speaking'.... This Englishness of our acting, though still fascinating to some foreign audiences, is a major obstacle to the development of cinema and TV fiction relevant to a modern British audience....

Many British actors are still trained to perform on the nineteenth century stage. Almost inevitably, reflexes of overacting and playing to the gallery are strongly developed....

British theatre and cinema lack demonstrative gestural acting. The problem for British actors is that there is no training for film work.... Reliance on the voice makes it difficult for British actors to adapt to the film acting advocated by Kuleshov or the Method underplaying of American actors. Building a new British screen actor involves challenging our theatrically dominated culture... and taking the training of our own film actors seriously.

—extracts from *Acting Tapes*.

Acting Tapes—Acting in the Cinema are two hour-long videos made by Zero One for broadcast on Channel 4's Eleventh Hour in early 1986. The tapes have already been exhibited in theatrical and educational venues, including the Tyneside Film Festival, where they won the 1984 Tyne Video Award.

The directors of the tapes are James Swinson and Mark Nash (a former editor of *Screen*), who are interviewed below. The discussion concentrates on issues of performance in the cinema, but in so doing addresses the tasks facing the independent sector in constructing a cinema and TV culture for the future. The tapes themselves do not attempt to analyse the characteristic forms of performance which have dominated British cinema or TV. Instead, they explore two traditions of performance which, although exerting some influence in Britain, have been primarily developed and employed elsewhere. The first tape explores the naturalist tradition as practiced by Stanislavsky and developed by the American Method school, while the second tape concentrates on the anti-naturalistic tradition of Meyerhold, Kuleshov and Brecht. The ideas and training methods of the two traditions are investigated in a workshop format with

four English trained performers, supplemented by various archival material.

Beneath the detailed look at these different performance practices, there are two central arguments implicit in this work. First, in the tape on naturalism, there is never any sense of a simple derisory *dismissal* of the tradition, as one might have expected; on the contrary it is given a sympathetic and powerful re-evaluation. In particular, the tape stresses the *collective* work of the Moscow Arts Theatre and shows how, while this ensemble practice was continued at the Group Theatre in the US in the '30s, the subsequent development of the Method at the Actors Studio in the '50s virtually turned the Stanislavsky system on its head. The Method has tended to create marketable personalities, and it has transformed Stanislavsky's ideas about the relaxation and concentration of the actor almost into a form of psychotherapy, emphasising the actor's personal experience.

In the second tape, on the anti-naturalist tradition, what emerges most strongly is the argument that the physical dynamism and expressivity of performance drawing on a biomechanical training is far more suited to cinema than the training which predominates in drama schools in Britain at present. As Kuleshov commented:

Cinema doesn't allow for the faking of appearance. To imagine, to pretend, to act is useless. It all turns out very badly on screen.

We are not concerned with psychology and the emotions but with the body – its litness, flexibility and rhythmic qualities.¹

The other valuable argument of the tapes is that there has *never* developed a strong tradition of either naturalist or anti-naturalist acting in British theatre or cinema. The emphasis has been on the voice, declamation, actorliness. While actors such as Albert Finney and Richard Harris adopted some of the characteristics of the American Method in films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *This Sporting Life*, the Method has had little lasting impact on British cinema. To quote again from the tapes,

The challenge for British cinema today is to develop a performance style that comes to terms with our theatrical tradition.

Andrew Higson: How do you see the *Acting Tapes* tying into contemporary debates about cinema in Britain?

Mark Nash: There's an argument running through both tapes, about British cinema and acting, which is summed up at the end of the second tape, where we talk about the need for a form of screen acting that is aware of its own theatricality. We're not arguing for a return to some kind of pure notion of a Brechtian screen acting, but rather that we should look at the resources of British cinema and see what are the most progressive and interesting aspects from the point of view of performance. There's much to be said for valorising certain performance tradi-

¹ Lev Kuleshov, from 'Art of the Cinema' in Ronald Levaco, *Kuleshov on Film*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1974, see pp 41-123

tions within mainstream British cinema which have tended to be dismissed critically – I’m thinking of the more ‘theatrical’ styles of performance: British Gothic, Hammer Horror and so on – and also the comedy tradition, the ‘Carry On’ films, etc.

Andrew Higson: It’s not clear to me whether your argument is about British cinema as defined by British Film Year, or whether it’s an argument specifically about independent cinema.

Mark Nash: Yes, there is a bit of a slippage between dominant and independent. But in a sense, the address is both ways. This hesitation, or uncertainty perhaps, indicates the origins of the project – beginning as a set of observations about independent cinema but developing into an examination of performance traditions in mainstream theatre and cinema. And we leave it as an argument that could be taken up in relation to the dominant cinema or in relation to independent cinema. But we also need to ask whether there is something today that we can call independent cinema which is separate from the mainstream. It’s a complex discussion: we might say that *The Eleventh Hour*² represents an idea of independent cinema as an alternative practice, but at the same time attempts to integrate it with the mainstream. I don’t think anybody has really made up their minds about which direction to go – or how to take the best of both worlds.

Andrew Higson: Perhaps one of the problems with the implicit and in some ways open-ended argument of the tapes is that it could be mis-read as proposing, say, that Olivier should have adopted a more Kuleshovian style of performance in his Shakespeare films, or that Meyerhold should have directed the performances in *Gandhi* or *Passage to India*!

Mark Nash: Yes, that argument needs to be brought out in discussion around the tapes, at screenings and so on – where we can focus on concrete examples of contemporary films and the problems people have with those films.

Andrew Higson: At times, it seems that the tapes are simply presenting a history of different performance styles, reduced precisely to *just* a style, *just* a form of training, which might be interchangeable between different directors, different films, different forms of cinema. On the other hand, there is also a polemic for a certain form of cinema, and by implication a certain set of ideological effects, and I suppose I’m saying that this isn’t addressed clearly enough.

Mark Nash: The tension is partly a result of our decision not to over-contextualise the acting traditions, which perhaps does allow them to be constructed as just another way of acting. But as you say our argument is also very much about the kind of cinema that we *should* have – which embraces dominant cinema and TV and experimental and avant-garde forms. We wanted to steer clear of using Brecht in a canonical way, although of course his work is a reference in the tapes. The influence of Brechtian performance traditions in cinema is very narrow, but you’re talking about cinema as it is, as opposed to cinema as it might be and you have to acknowledge the influence of those ideas. So Brecht is a focus of a lot of different elements in the text, but in an implicit way. Acting is

clearly a major element in our dissatisfaction with cinema today – but actually it's probably not where the problems start from, but a symptom of much wider problems.

James Swinson: Those problems are, of course, exacerbated by the fact that dissatisfaction with contemporary cinema in Britain has been almost overwhelmed by the euphoria surrounding its supposed renaissance. It's important to find some way of breaking that conspiracy which has us all fantasising about the rise of a new British cinema.

Andrew Higson: How did you come to make the tapes?

Mark Nash: To some extent the tapes came out of reflecting on some of the things that were going on at *Screen* in the '70s and the difficulty of getting contributions on film acting. There had been a lot of attention to the performance of film and the cinematic experience and there had been a lot of attention to the codes of cinema and of the image itself, but paradoxically there hadn't really been much attention to performance in the simple sense of acting and acting traditions.

James Swinson: Yes, on the one hand, with the important exception of Richard Dyer's work³, there is an absence of address to performance in an enormous amount of theoretical work that's been done on film, while on the other hand popular film culture, in the daily press or glossy magazines, addresses performance all the time, albeit in the most facile way around the star system. While a lot of people, regular film-goers, would talk about going to see a De Niro movie or a Brando movie and actually ascribe the authorship to the performance, this is in complete contrast to the dynamics of dominant film culture which ascribes authorship in terms of directors.

Mark Nash: So, starting from these observations we drafted a proposal to the BFI (British Film Institute) Production Board. Our argument was that British independent movies really suffered from their approach to performance and that this warranted some investigation. We were proposing at that time a couple of workshop tapes, examining acting in a workshop situation, taping actors over a period of time and seeing how they responded to different styles.

James Swinson: The other more modest motivation for using the workshop was to show that acting, performance, is constructed.

Mark Nash: In the meantime, Alan Fountain had become Commissioning Editor for Independent Film at Channel 4 and that was one of the projects that he was interested in taking on at the Channel because it was addressed to independent cinema. As we developed it, we felt it would be very difficult to address independent cinema directly without being extremely critical and we decided to bracket off the address to the independent constituency and to focus on theories of performance in twentieth century theatre and cinema, and also to combine the workshop idea with an informational-critical discourse . . .

So there were two motivations for making the tapes. One was the straightforwardly critical look at dominant approaches to performance in the cinema, and the emphasis on the star system – and although this is perhaps a very familiar criticism, we felt it needed re-stating. The other

³ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London, British Film Institute, 1979.

was our interest in performance itself, and in working with actors. We always intended the tapes to have an educational function, raising the issue of acting, so that they could form a focus of debate and discussion within the independent constituency –

James Swinson: – and in other institutions where those arguments are most likely to be taken up: film and TV schools and faculties, etc, where people are more open to the need to work closely with performers.

Mark Nash: One of the problems for independent film-makers is that they don't have that much experience of working with actors. At that level it's important to argue for people having the opportunity to make more programmes, more films, and even, I would say, to make fewer feature-length films, and put more emphasis on working on a lot of different kinds of things. If we are to build up a more definitive independent film culture, film-makers must have some continuity of work. What a lot of film-makers do is just get one film every two or three years, and that does create problems in terms of working with actors. As far as our own limited experience is concerned we chose the workshop strategy because we felt it would enable us to work with actors in the kind of context we had set up without over-reaching ourselves. I think we'd have been very uneasy about shooting a fiction without having done the work that we've done. We've learned a lot both about the kinds of ways we'd want to work aesthetically but also about some of the practical and psychological issues of day-to-day getting-on with actors in rehearsal and shoot situations.

Andrew Higson: Can you say something about the film seasons planned to accompany the tapes?

Mark Nash: The tapes were commissioned and made for Channel 4, but we made sure that we retained the non-theatrical rights so that we could show the tapes outside of the broadcast context. The Channel 4 screenings are to be accompanied by four feature films which the two *Acting Tapes* will preface. The films will probably be: *Death by Hanging* (directed by Nagisa Oshima, 1968) *Mouchette* (directed by Robert Bresson, 1967), *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (directed by Sergei Komarov, 1924) and *Tout Va Bien* (directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972). The films will have short introductions which will give some background to the film and their interest in terms of performance. They have been selected because they all involve various kinds of non-naturalistic performance and non-naturalistic cinema but they are not that inaccessible to the audience; they are fairly mainstream films but they raise interesting issues around performance.

James Swinson: For the Channel 4 series we did privilege films that people wouldn't have seen necessarily on TV before and films that we liked and where we felt positive about the strategy that directors had adopted around performance. It obviously didn't make a lot of sense to us, given the limited time available, to show, for instance, '50s Method in performance – *On the Waterfront* or something like that – because that's the kind of thing people can pick up anyway.

Mark Nash: In addition, there are plans to have a couple of regional events following the screenings, probably at Bristol and in the East Midlands. And also a short season at the National Film Theatre in London. These will involve discussion events and related screenings, where we will show the more popular sorts of films that we've left out of the C4 season.

Andrew Higson: What sort of response have you had from audiences when you've shown the tapes publicly? In particular, how have actors responded to your arguments?

James Swinson: When we've shown the tapes, we've found that actors tend to be either very sympathetic to the argument of the tapes if they are trying to do radical work (at the Tyneside Cinema discussion there was quite a contingent of pro-Brechtian performers) or else they are very offended. The tapes really do upset some performers because they think they are being held personally responsible for a criticism which is being levelled at the film industry! This has often diverted the argument in discussion: in the end, we want to focus on cinema – they tend to divert it into a defence of English stage drama. Although we make reference in the tapes to actors being trained in an inappropriate style for cinema, the job of the tapes isn't to take on the British stage.

Andrew Higson: You did some research on the forms of training at drama schools in Britain. What did you learn?

Mark Nash: Our overall impression was that there was very little contact between film and theatre training. For instance at RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) they apparently devote one day in their course to film training, working in front of the camera. Now we've begun to show the tapes around, and actors have talked about their experiences at drama schools, it seems that barriers are breaking down a little – but this is, I suspect, in a rather *ad hoc* fashion. For instance, film students need actors who are prepared to work for free and so you go to drama colleges and you get a group of actors who are prepared to work for free and the performances that they'll produce are the performances that they've been trained in, in their colleges. There are very few situations where people are training specifically for film or TV – although some of the more enlightened drama schools are beginning to realise that most actors are actually going to end up working in TV first, film and theatre second.

Andrew Higson: Are there any schools that actually have courses in Meyerhold's or Kuleshov's training methods?

Mark Nash: Some colleges have that sort of work as an element of their courses, but mainly in the context of theatrical performance. Certainly, there is work on Meyerhold, but not, to our knowledge, anything specifically using Kuleshov and adapting it for film work.

James Swinson: It's also worth pointing out that there are only a very few places which follow a course that's based on the Stanislavsky system with any kind of rigour. The problem is that naturalism and even more so anti-naturalism have not really touched British institutions responsible for training actors. What people will come up with is: 'Yes, we did

this exercise here and there and we did a block in the middle of a course, where someone came in and did a few Stanislavsky exercises with us.' There's a kind of eclecticism in drama schools, and the courses are very much worked out around performances. There isn't any consistent theoretical underpinning to that kind of training.

Mark Nash: I think that what we discovered about drama school training is equally applicable to film school training or art school training. That is to say, the school curriculum develops in a rather *ad hoc* and eclectic manner, and in saying that we are expressing a preference for quite structured, rigorous curricula. In terms of art school you might think of a Bauhaus form of training as opposed to the ones that exist at present. Obviously teachers who are quite sympathetic to the arguments of the tapes may say that the realities of teaching situations are such that you have to pick elements from different performance styles and do what you can. I don't think we'd want to set ourselves completely against that, but the problem is that it can lose the specificity of particular approaches. And I suppose the film schools fare no better than the drama schools. In the National Film School, for instance, they've only fairly recently gone over to producing fiction and they still import actors to work on particular projects. It doesn't have any systematic training on performance and fiction directing which is strange given the perceived strengths and weaknesses of British cinema. I think that's the same for other film schools.

There is also the problem of how change takes place, say, in performance styles. There's a fairly standard version of history which says that changes in acting styles are produced by the playwrights. For instance, in the nineteenth century, certainly, the naturalistic playwrights were in advance of the performance styles of the time and the performance styles were developed and adapted to the needs of the playwrights – and I think to some extent that's still the case. In terms of cinema the kinds of scripts that are still written must in part determine the kinds of performance that are produced in the films.

Andrew Higson: Central to the *Acting Tapes* are the workshops with the performers. How did you actually organise that work?

James Swinson: We worked with the actors for two months, so we had a very extensive period of rehearsal before we got into taping and had already established strong relationships with them in a way that filmmakers don't usually. It was unfortunate that we couldn't show more of that as a process, that the relationship between director and performer had to be constructed. Originally, as we've said, the workshops were going to be a more substantial element, and less constructed, and you'd have been able to compare the actors' progress over a period of time and see how they came up against and dealt with problems that were presented by these different styles and training exercises. The workshop did end up being a bit of a compromise because of union agreements. That's to say, we worked with the actors in rehearsals, then we had to reconstruct that work with crews for the actual shots. It's true to say that, in terms of how the actors coped with them, the exercises were always per-

formed better in rehearsal and had more of a rehearsal feel, had more of a sense of people working, than we were able to convey in the conditions of shooting the workshop sequences that actually ended up in the programme.

Mark Nash: The workshop element was perhaps too ambitious in that we had this notion of showing the training in progress, and of exploring the ideological underpinning. And what we hadn't reckoned with was the cost and the mechanics of doing that. As James said, we opted for a compromise; the idea was that the performances were not to be exemplary. Actors were going to be trying different approaches, which they did with varying degrees of success, and certain passages worked better than others, I think.

Andrew Higson: You do get a good sense of how performance is actually constructed both through the editing and the camerawork, and through the presence of the director—which you clearly foreground in the workshop session, by recording the directions you give to the actors, and by seeing you on camera choreographing their actions and movements. But that then raises the question of how audiences have reacted to the workshop sequences, to seeing actors in training, rather than seeing polished finished performances.

James Swinson: With the workshop sequences we are demanding that the audience does a certain amount of work, and those exercises have worked best when the audience has been prepared to reflect on them and to make its own sense of the relationship between the exercise material and the ideas that are expressed in the archive material. At the Tyneside Festival discussion, one really felt that that happened, that people were prepared to do that work. In other places—well, one really indicative comment is when people say: 'actually, what we would have really liked is to get these actors to do a little narrative performance.' Then they could somehow make sense of it. Their feeling is 'we can't really judge whether these people are good actors or not, or whether this performance is useful or not because the only way we can judge performance is within a play when we know what is really happening.' They don't really want to get to grips with the process of performance itself.

Mark Nash: They want to be entertained and I think, instead of apologising for it, one could put it more positively and say that some audiences are very disturbed with the idea of bad performance and watching people trying and succeeding or failing. As James said, they want the performance to be placed in some fictional context. If you have a sense of people working towards some end, that's fine—but if you don't see the finished achievement then that seems to create problems. And of course, the exercises that we show are all *exercisēs*, they are not necessarily incorporated into performances. Historically, it's worth noting that some of Meyerhold's exercises were incorporated into his theatrical performances—but some of them are just general training exercises and would not be easily incorporated into finished performances. If they were it would negate the work that was being done. They are actually exercises which are done separately, so the only way of incorporating

Focusing on the simple things: pouring tea in the *Acting Tapes*.



fiction really would have been to do another tape, which was at that point not within our resources. We deliberately chose extremely basic exercises but some people seem to misunderstand this. They seem to think that we are missing out a level of complexity in focusing on the very simple things of how to peel an orange or how to make a cup of tea or whatever, without taking the point which people like Lee Strasberg and Stanislavsky make: if you can't get those things right then the other more complex requirements will be even more difficult. It's the things that people take for granted, the unconsciousness of entering a room, for instance, which are important in performance. Too often, it's assumed that anybody knows how to enter a room and go over and close a window or whatever, we don't have to think about that. And what we *do* have to think about is building up big emotional statements!

James Swinson: This is also very much a director's problem. It's a question of the degree to which you are aware of how specific an action is, and of the specific qualities which you can build into an action. One of the fundamental things about cinema direction is how you shoot and put together those very basic actions – and it's something that's often overlooked.

Actors who are not trained for cinema cannot content themselves with such an elementary task as how to enter a room, approach a window and open it. Ordinarily such a task is done with a scornful derision, so easy and elementary does it seem. If you ask an actor to perform this task several times you will see that it is performed variously, with different motions, and comes out sometimes better, sometimes worse.

– Lev Kuleshov⁴

⁴ Lev Kuleshov, op cit.

Andrew Higson: Did you do the exercises in the order that they are in, in the film? Did you work on Stanislavsky first and Meyerhold second?

James Swinson: Yes, they were done in that order, so as we say in the tapes, in the Stanislavsky section, they went from the most basic kinds of sensory exercises into more complex, conceptual kinds. We actually did more exercises than are shown in the tapes. In fact we went through the whole of both Stanislavsky's and Strasberg's schedule of exercises and then did the same with Meyerhold and Kuleshov.

Mark Nash: We decided to work through the exercises in that systematic way because we felt that the performers would really get confused if they had to move between those different styles in a concentrated shoot. It would have become incredibly artificial and confusing to them and to us, especially since, as we discovered, the Strasberg approach is so seductive. In fact, we did end up reducing the actors to tears, not by being aggressive but actually by this process of a kind of therapeutic investment of their own psychology into the exercises they were playing. In fact, we were surprised at the extent to which this psychological approach came as a complete revelation to the performers. We assumed that their training would have given them more of that experience but obviously over here this isn't the case. In America, it definitely is the case, and if you talk to actors who have trained in the States and then come over and work here, they find it extremely difficult given the nature of British theatrical training.

James Swinson: With a lot of the exercises, the concept seems so simple, and yet unless you actually go through them, they are hard to understand. For instance, Stanislavsky's idea of concentration is such a basic idea – you hold back and take your time to think about what you are doing and to get yourself into the mood of what you are doing. That seems such a basic step, but it proved quite difficult for our performers. If you say to an actor 'I want you to walk in and pick that up off the table', immediately, before you can even stop them, they are doing it – you feel



Concentration in the Stanislavsky tradition.

that the performers want to get it over with. Actors don't like repetition. What struck us was that if you keep them working at something they tire incredibly easily, and things start to fall apart, and the performance itself gets worse and worse. Also, it is very hard to represent the basic notion of concentration in the Stanislavsky tradition in a cinematic way – basically, you have someone sitting there doing nothing!

Mark Nash: Working with the actors definitely clarified our understanding of the Method. It enabled us to see much more precisely and be much more critical of performances in American cinema – particularly, for instance, the move from early Brando to later, mannered, Brando, or James Dean's mannerisms and Meryl Streep's mannerisms. A tension develops when American cinema begins to concentrate more and more on performance. Having worked with actors and got a concrete sense of the process of that training, you could register it going on much more in the performances in the films.

Andrew Higson: The tapes also work in that way for the spectator, by drawing attention to the details of different performance styles. Some of the sequences are very powerful in this respect. I'm thinking particularly of the passage where you work on a scene from *On The Waterfront*, where Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint are talking in a park. Brando is playing with one of her gloves, unconsciously, it seems. It's a very clear example of the way in which the Method uses objects to enable the actors to concentrate, to take their minds off the fact that they are performing for an audience.

James Swinson: There's an interesting passage in an interview with Elia Kazan (who directed the film) where he talks about those moments in his films of the '50s which derived from work at the Actors Studio; he discusses in some detail the transaction with the glove by Brando in *On The Waterfront*:

*There's another example of this use of objects in a scene that was partly accidental and partly the talent of the actor who was in it: that scene in **On the Waterfront** where Brando is walking Eva Marie Saint home, rather against her will; and she on the one hand is attracted to him, and on the other hand wishes that he'd leave her alone because there's a social stigma attached to him, so she'd rather lose him, and at the same time she's attracted to him and would rather keep him. And he, too, is attracted to her, but he's also shy, and tense about connecting with her because he was responsible for the death of her brother. But mainly Brando wants to keep her, despite her desire to get rid of him. As they were walking along, she accidentally dropped her glove; and Brando picked the glove up; and by holding it, she couldn't get away – the glove was his way of holding her. Furthermore, whereas he couldn't, because of this tension about her brother being killed, demonstrate any sexual or loving feeling towards her, he could towards the glove. And he put his hand inside the glove, you remember, so that the glove was both his way of holding on to her against her will, and at the same time he was able to express, through the glove, something he couldn't express to her directly. So the object, in that sense, did it all.⁵*

⁵ Elia Kazan, quoted in Michel Ciment, *Kazan on Kazan*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1973, pp 45–46.

Mark Nash: Interestingly, Kazan points out that the scene was actually



Marlon Brando improvising with the glove in *On the Waterfront*.

improvised, which is why the camera is in wide shot. What we see is Brando's response to the scene, given his training. It wasn't a scripted performance.

Andrew Higson: Another sequence which brings home very clearly the function of a particular style of performance training is at the end of the second tape, where one of your workshop performers is shown speaking Shakespeare while cleaning her teeth! The amazing thing is that the obstacle in no way affects the articulacy of the English-trained actor's voice. Is that an exercise which you developed yourselves to make that point?

James Swinson: We got the idea from an Edward Bond workshop. I think that he would be ready to admit that it was quite Brechtian in its influence. Brecht has a whole series of exercises where he deliberately goes out of his way to give people such resistances. It really knocked us out that there was no way that cleaning your teeth was any impediment to the text.

Mark Nash: Bond uses those exercises to demonstrate the materialist approach to acting, and the thing that struck us about them was actually the reverse. He was putting the National Theatre actors through them and they had no problems and the audience was amused by it – but they didn't get the point that even under fire the actors could still produce these speeches.

Andrew Higson: The tapes stick very closely to two performance traditions. Can you say why you didn't look at other work – post-war developments in the West, for instance, or the Commedia or vaudeville traditions, or Eastern traditions of performance, such as Kabuki or Noh?

Mark Nash: Part of the original proposal that went into Channel 4 was for a larger series of programmes, in which some of these other areas would have been explored. It seemed that the anti-naturalistic traditions

in both Japan and India could be linked into their cinemas, but then we'd have had to look at those cinemas in some detail. This seemed like taking on too much, and we decided to focus on the European traditions. On the other hand, we didn't feel that more recent developments in theatre, such as Grotowski's work or the American theatre movements had influenced film, and I think that you can trace that to the way the film industry has developed. There are certain points in film history where theatre and film have come together quite closely—around the coming of sound, for instance. And possibly at certain points in avant-garde film-making too, where there have been cross-overs.

James Swinson: The original proposal followed up almost every conceivable discourse around performance. We wanted to question in a much more analytical way what performance is. We were also very drawn to the anti-naturalism of art performance work.

NATURALISM AND ANTI-NATURALISM

Andrew Higson: Although the implicit argument of the *Acting Tapes* is greatly influenced by Brecht, you are in fact sympathetic towards Stanislavsky.

James Swinson: Brecht himself had some very positive things to say about Stanislavsky, and really what we discovered when we looked at Stanislavsky in detail was very much the sense of a moment when someone got to grips with a whole cultural area. What Stanislavsky says really is: 'let's be systematic about how you train actors, let's be systematic about how you perform on stage.' That's very attractive in an area where people are so undisciplined in what they say and do. It goes back to this whole thing about eclecticism: when it comes to performance, almost anything goes, and it's very useful to go back to this kind of rigour. I suppose we were slightly surprised at just how rigorous it was. We also feel very strongly that it is hard to understand anti-naturalism, Brechtian acting and so on—however familiar we may feel we are with it—without the context of naturalism, without actually understanding that. Even people like Strasberg, as the advocate of a certain kind of naturalism, show an unexpected sympathy to Brecht. In one of his books, Strasberg describes going to Berlin to see the Berliner Ensemble and being quite knocked out at how naturalistic Brecht's work was. He describes it in detail, and then talks about the way in which Brecht actually breaks with that:

For years everyone has read that the Brecht Theatre goes in for something called 'alienation', which means that the audience is encouraged not to be involved or to believe in the play. The intention supposedly is to make the audience see the production simply as a theatrical performance. Well, I waited for 'alienation' to be used in rehearsals, and I was rather shocked because the first thing that the directors said to the actors was something like this: 'Now, please, make it realer. A little realer. What the hell are you doing there? Don't make it so stylized. Don't do all that theatricality. Drop that

actor's tone. *This is the real thing. Just tell it to him.*' And then they would explain very simply and try to show the actor how to speak very naturally.

*Their acting was the simplest acting I have ever seen in my life. I would not have the courage to permit actors to be as simple as these people demand that their actors be. The acting is stripped of all mannerisms, of anything whose purpose is to show the actor's skill or his special talent. It is character acting in its simplest form. The actors are usually well chosen. The character is clearly stated. The actors then with the utmost simplicity and at times the utmost lack of theatricality – which in itself comes across as a kind of theatricality – act out the events and the situations in the play.*⁶

⁶ Robert H. Hethmon, *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1966, p. 390.

James Swinson: I do think that an understanding of naturalism is particularly important because over the last ten or fifteen years there's been so much talk in theatre and film about returning to Brecht, and quoting Brecht as a source, but, as we see it, in this country at least, people don't have the benefit of a naturalistic mainstream against which to judge it.

Andrew Higson: That quotation from Strasberg, on how naturalistic he found Brecht, is exactly how I felt about those sequences in the tapes where you explore Brechtian demonstrative acting – particularly about the sequence where you elaborate on the suicide scene from *Kuhle Wampe*, and also the 'demonstration' of a customer talking to a sales assistant in a shop. The exercises did seem very naturalistic, partly, I think, because you've seen those sorts of ideas in so much theatre and television work and in some independent film work – in a sense, it's been naturalised. But it's also partly because it is at that moment in the tapes where you have a little narrative sequence: it's much less a workshop session and much more a little fiction.

James Swinson: The work that we did on Brecht came down really to working on the suicide scene. It was incredibly instructive because it was the area with which the actors had most trouble, when you might have



Brechtian acting: an elaboration on the suicide scene from *Kuhle Wampe*.

thought that they were at last going to get into something. The actors were actually putting the pressure on us to do a bit of a performance, to act out a little dramatic sequence. They were getting slightly edgy about doing these vignettes in the training exercises, and you do find that the resources that actors easily revert to are fairly limited. That's not a criticism of those actors – in some ways they were very courageous because they were prepared to let themselves be seen, warts and all, in a quite unprotected situation. But what we found was that those basic things that Brecht demanded in terms of social observation and so on, are things that actors are not used to doing. It surprised us how much we had to feed them the social observation, because they didn't have it: that specificity of people's social attitudes, how a person might react in a given context

Mark Nash: I would agree with Andrew that part of the problem was that those Brechtian exercises were narrativised – but then, looking back at the exercises that we found in Brecht's notes, they all actually involve narrative elements; they are little scenes between two people; or the actors are required to use objects but usually with some kind of connotation immediately being established. That was obviously his interest in focusing attention, but the use of narrative doesn't quite fit into the scheme that we were working with.

Andrew Higson: How did the actors cope with the two different traditions of training? Were they much happier with the more psychological, emotional demands of the naturalist exercises?

James Swinson: No, not necessarily. All having been trained as English actors, it was both very hard for them to deal with the more external kinds of performance, and hard for them to get into the part, or cope with the different concepts of concentration, and so on.

If we observe a skilled worker in action, we notice the following in his movements: an absence of superfluous unproductive movements; rhythm; the correct positioning of the body's centre of gravity; stability. . . . The artist should also be an engineer, and have an engineer's knowledge of the mechanics of the body. Like the skilled worker on the production line, the actor must aim for economy, for maximum productivity in his work.

– V E Meyerhold⁷

People performing organised efficient work appear best on the screen.

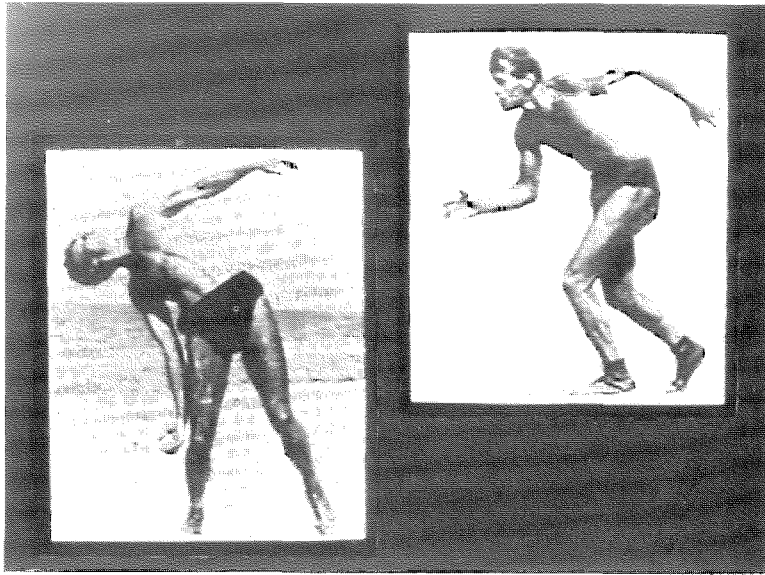
– Lev Kuleshov⁸

⁷ V E Meyerhold, quoted in Edward Braun (ed), *Meyerhold on Theatre*, Eyre Methuen, London, see pp 197-200.

⁸ Lev Kuleshov, op cit.

Andrew Higson: Your actor in some ways is more fluid than you really want him to be. That's fairly clear, I think, in the Meyerhold exercise, 'Shooting the bow'. He never quite manages the intensity of action, the dynamism of the body, that is evident in the stills of the Meyerhold performer doing the same exercise. As you say in the tapes, one is struck by the energy and expressiveness of the Soviet actors of this period.

Mark Nash: There is a historical side to that, in that the physical exercise training that was very popular in the Soviet Union was a kind of body building as well, not necessarily with weights, but it was certainly



The actor as gymnast: stills of Meyerhold's exercises.

gymnastics-orientated. You can see that in the stills of the Meyerhold performer as well as in images of other performers. Our actor was trained as a dancer, and dancers, I would have thought, are less concerned with building muscles in that visible way. It's two different aesthetics of the body really.

James Swinson: There was a series of exercises in Meyerhold's repertoire that our performers just didn't have the strength to perform – where you have to pick each other up and so on. Of course, there are lifts in dance, but this is rather different from picking someone up as a dead weight from the floor. In dance, you are generally assisted. The Meyerholdian notion of actually doing work establishes a relationship with the labourer who is used to carrying heavy loads which are picked up as dead weight. That's very different from dance. Some of our performers did want to dance in a sense, because in dance you create the illusion of weight, or movement.

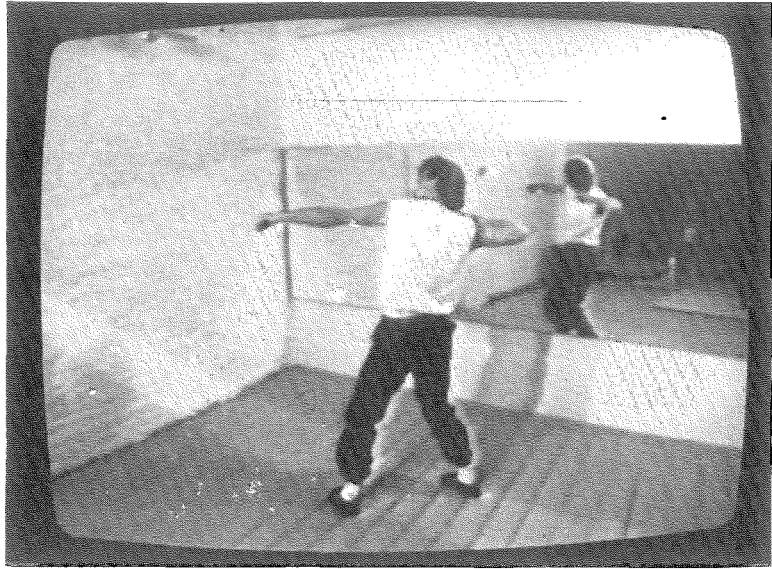
Andrew Higson: Rather than the illusion of real work.

Mark Nash: The point of those exercises is to convey the notion of physical co-ordination. In a sense, it's a kind of externalised version of concentration in physical co-ordination; it's inner and outer, if you like, and that was the key point.

James Swinson: Yes – we wanted to draw attention to that very physical use of the body in the Meyerholdian tradition of performance, and to juxtapose that both with the methods of working in the first tape on naturalism, and with the way the anti-naturalist tradition has been incorporated into some independent film work.

Andrew Higson: The way in which you valorise this tradition does seem to assume a certain form of narrative cinema, embodying narrative energy, action and so on.

'Shooting the bow': the male body on display.



Mark Nash: Yes, that's true. And implicit in this is the belief that, as Raymond Williams has stated on a number of occasions, realist narrative cinema, and realism in general, still has a lot of life left in it as a form, despite all the deconstructions and reconstructions that one would like to do on it. This connects back to the points that we made earlier about Brecht being both an anti-naturalist and a naturalist.

It's really in the spirit of this line of debate that we have selected the films for the National Film Theatre season: for instance, Richard Woolley's *Telling Tales*, and Nick Burton and Anthea Kennedy's *At The Fountainhead*. They're all from a particular period in the '70s when there was an attempt to re-define performance styles. Burton and Kennedy, for instance, use different performers to play the same character, and there's an attempt to re-work narrative cinema and to some extent question the role of performance within that. I don't think in the end that it works successfully, partly because they use actors who are not secure in the new style, and partly because they too perhaps are not clear about the kind of cinema that they want to produce. It's a question of constantly trying to construct a cinema for the future.

Andrew Higson: For yourselves, the way in which you foreground the dynamism and energy of Kuleshov performance styles suggests a nuanced call for a cinema of strong narrative action, which does carry with it certain assumptions about gender roles. That is to say, in the Hollywood tradition, narrative action is almost always weighted as a *masculine* pursuit. Indeed, there is an emphasis in the tapes on the male body in action, the male body on display . . .

Mark Nash: You're obviously right about Hollywood cinema, but in Soviet theatre and cinema, those codes are not sexed in the same way. We have both the male and the female performers in the second tape wearing uniforms, which in part is a reference back to the uniforms which men



Soviet actress
Alexandra Khoklova:
the dynamism of the
female performer.

and women in the theatre movement wore; and the cult of physical dynamism involved both men and women. Khoklova⁹ herself was extremely dynamic and energetic. What you're saying indicates the problem of reading Soviet cinema of the 1920s from the point of view of the present.

There's another issue in relation to masculinity which might be worth bringing out here, in relation to our emphasis on male actors in the first tape. There is an argument about the role of women in the Method, and the tendency of the Method to reinforce stereotypes of maleness, and in particular newly emergent post-war definitions of masculinity.

Andrew Higson: Yes, in some ways you can read the Method as a re-investment of emotionality into the narrative film, where emotionality is conventionally associated with the feminine.

(The Method) emphasises the inner nature of the actor's self, the truth of their private emotion, as the prime source of artistic creativity.

—Harold Clurman¹⁰

Mark Nash: In that sense, the men become more feminised and emotional. And the role of women becomes slightly problematical, because it's not clear what the female character is supposed to be carrying in terms of the film.

James Swinson: In fact, it's not until the '60s that the Method has any impact on female performance in Hollywood. Then, in the '70s and '80s, reacting to the influence of feminism, Hollywood tries to construct new roles for women. They fall back on women actors trained in the Method school. Even so, these same women actors have pointed out that these roles are still few and far between.

⁹ Alexandra Khoklova, a Soviet actress prominent in Kuleshov's films and a founder member of the Kuleshov Workshop.

¹⁰ Harold Clurman, quoted in Christine Edwards, *The Stanislavsky Heritage*, New York University Press, 1965, p 269.

TAPING THE PERFORMANCE/ THE PERFORMANCE OF THE TAPES

Andrew Higson: How did you decide on the strategies for taping the exercises?

James Swinson: We deliberately chose a static camera, and generally the exercises were shot in wide shot; we didn't want to dramatise the exercises because that would have complicated the whole relation of the camera to the performers and the exercises. This does seem to give some audiences a problem with the workshop material, because they expect the conventions of dominant cinema and TV. We could, say, have shot the exercise of drinking a cup of tea from five or six different angles and intercut them. But we felt this would have given a level of drama, through the camera and editing, which would have obscured the exercise as it was performed. That was definitely a problem, and we chose a different style of camerawork in the two programmes for filming the exercises.

Andrew Higson: I did wonder after a first viewing of the tapes whether there was something of a conflict between your argument for what we might call a montage cinema, and, on the other hand, your use of sequence shots and wide shots and so on. But, in fact, the first tape seems to depend much more on the sequence shot while the second tape builds up towards montage editing of the performance.

Mark Nash: Yes, that was the intention . . .

Andrew Higson: One way of describing the structure of the tapes is that they work as a montage of attractions, so that, even if you have got sequence shots of the workshop performances, they are always montaged against a variety of other materials; so you don't lose the montage aspect of it, even though you are at one stage talking about naturalism.

Was it an integral part of your strategy to use video? Was there any particular reason for not using film?

Mark Nash: We chose to use video because of our extended rehearsal method of working, and in fact we initially worked with a low-band camera and did our own taping, before we got the broadcast crew in. It was much easier and more flexible to work with video.

James Swinson: Also we wanted to avoid the fetishistic film image. Cinema lighting for instance could have made the images much more attractive, where with high-key TV lighting, it's almost like you're not trying to hide anything!

Andrew Higson: In some ways, I'm reminded of Bazinian aesthetics: the idea of not dramatising the performance, of using wide shots and sequence shots, and high-key TV lighting and so on – all this seems like an attempt to 'allow' the unity and integrity of the performance to unfold in front of the camera. It's quite close to certain tendencies in cinematic naturalism, although that closeness is problematised, as we've already noted, by your montage strategies.

Mark Nash: We like to think that a strength of the tapes is that they do, through their montage and juxtaposition of different material, analyse

the performances – so that it's not just the voice-over directing our attentions. That does link in with the problems of audience, because the more familiar an audience is with the procedures of experimental avant-garde cinema the easier it is to make sense of the movement through the material. So, it's a familiar reading device for some people, while for others it's confusing, which is partly why we decided to use the voice-over strategy as part of the montage of the tapes. I think we do, in a sense, encourage contradictory readings: we encourage the tapes to be read as straightforward documentary, but we also encourage them to be worked upon as both a deconstruction and a reconstruction.

James Swinson: We would like to have allowed the audience to be more reflective on the material, by presenting it without the level of voice-over that there is accompanying the archival material. But when we showed it to various people in its early stages, they were not clear about what was actually going on in the exercises and so on. The material itself was so unfamiliar to most audiences that they wanted much more assistance in how to get into it. Certainly when we showed some of the early material to the Commissioning Editors at Channel 4, they were quite categorical that in order to put it out on the Channel more explanation would have to be gone into.

Andrew Higson: So there is a sense of television professionalism, making demands in terms of what is possible and what isn't possible on TV, and to some extent cutting against some of the assumptions of independent film- and video-makers.

Mark Nash: Certainly the tapes bear the traces of a strategy that hasn't been entirely worked out!

James Swinson: And we have ended up with more of an educational feel than we had originally intended, I think.

Andrew Higson: Perhaps we can take up these issues of mode of address, audiences, and particularly this notion of the tapes producing contradictory readings. Personally, I find the voice-over one of the more problematic aspects. At times, it seems too close to that familiar form of TV discourse where images simply illustrate the voice-over, while the voice itself carries the 'significant' information. As such, it also ties back to the instructional, didactic documentary tradition, the *Housing Problems* tradition, if you like.

Mark Nash: I think that's accurate. It was a strategy that we felt obliged to adopt at a fairly late stage. Having accepted the argument that the tapes needed introducing, then we essentially adopted the modes that TV already had. In a sense, we needed to be more conservative, and produce something which was pacier, so that now we go through the images much more quickly. It was felt that faster cutting would tie in better with the assumed attention span of TV audiences.

Andrew Higson: Still, that conventional relationship between voice-over, and images and stills which simply illustrate the voice-over, seems at times almost to be a *resistance* to the production of meaning.

Mark Nash: I know what you're getting at, but it was somehow beyond us to find a way of introducing what we felt to be enough visual material

and structuring it to create meaning without leaving the images there too long, and losing the interest of the viewer . . . It's a question of how you anchor the images, and we anchored them in a quite conventional way. If we could have found another strategy for introducing and contextualising the material, then we would have changed it. But the only strategy that we did find ended up being too long and unmanageable for a TV audience.

Andrew Higson: I'm again very much reminded of debates within the documentary movement in Britain in the '30s and '40s, particularly the conflicts between on the one hand the Edgar Anstey/instructional documentary/*Housing Problems* position, and on the other hand, the idea of a poetic montage of associations, which we can identify as the Humphrey Jennings position. In some ways, Anstey's criticisms of Jennings' *Listen to Britain* as being the rarest piece of fiddling since Nero let Rome burn are similar to the demands made on you from the point of view of TV professionalism: Anstey felt the film didn't work as good propaganda because it didn't fix its meanings strongly enough, and the poetic ambiguity of the montage needed to be contained by a voice-over.

Mark Nash: That's an interesting observation, and in some ways it connects back to a dilemma that I felt when I was working at *Screen* and was more involved in those sorts of debates. One was arguing for more poetic and indirect ways of stating things, I suppose, but at the same time one was very committed to this informational-critical mode of address. In fact, theoretical writing had to be quite rigorous and systematic about the poetic. I think you're probably right to say that that contradiction is there in the tapes and not entirely worked through. We were attracted to the poetic montage approach, and we were more drawn to that as the work on the tapes developed. But at the same time there was a commitment to a more straightforward way of communicating information. Perhaps if we'd been working in a different kind of slot where the programmes would have been presented within a contextualising discourse, we might have been able to play down the informational-critical discourse within the tapes, and be less didactic.

I think the reasons for the tensions within the tapes are also a reflection of the fact that the independent sector as a whole has failed to find a way out of the problem of mode of address. On the one hand, people are drawn into film-making by the artistic possibilities of making creative statements, or however you might formulate that; at the same time, they also have a series of political and theoretical commitments that they want to honour. There's always this oscillation between the bad conscience and the good conscience of politics and information.

Andrew Higson: I'd like to look at another aspect of the conventions of the voice-over as used in the tapes. Early on in the first tape, you have a wonderful extract from a training film for English actors and actresses.

James Swinson: Yes, it's a wartime film called *I Want To Be An Actress*, in which you see these amazing voice-training classes where the actors are being educated to speak Oxbridge English.

Andrew Higson: That then leads into James on voice-over asking 'why



Voice training in *I Want To Be An Actress*.

is it so embarrassing to see a film with English actors . . . ? Once English actors speak, not only do they speak with an accent and a class accent, but they are definitely trying to say “I am speaking”. So you have this interesting counterpoint between James’ non-Oxbridge English accent and the RADA voices of the actors in the training film. But I’m afraid I find it embarrassing the minute James starts speaking on the voice-over! It’s a question of conventions and expectations again: although you use your voices rather than a professional actor to read the voice-over, you do in the end ‘mimic’ professional conventions. But I don’t feel that you do it very successfully in terms of where you breathe, where you pause, where you lay the stress in the speech.

James Swinson: We didn’t want to use a professional presenter, because we felt that adds another level of performance. Also, because the voice-over is constructed so much as an argument, we felt we should give it our own voices. Obviously, we wanted the voices to be audible and so on, but, in the same way that we didn’t want to use professional presenters, we didn’t want to work too much on our own voices. I suppose, though, that this is another place in which we were cornered by the conventions. TV professionalism demands that you perform voice-overs in a certain kind of way, which is actually completely against my style of speaking!

LOST TRADITIONS

Andrew Higson: In some ways, the project of the tapes can be seen as an attempt to re-construct lost traditions of performance, and one of the dangers in such a project must be avoiding a simple fetishisation of them. But in the end, the tapes do avoid fetishising the performance.

Rather than there being an incredible sense of presence – the spectacle of the performance, there in front of us – there's much more of a sense of loss foregrounded in the construction of the performance. That sense of loss is very much a product, I think, of how you use the music: it's very 'evocative' music, it almost has a memory built into it, partly because of the echo you use, and partly because of the repetition in the music track. This is one of the more poetic aspects of the tapes – but immediately, that whole debate about the ambiguity of meaning is opened up again: how are we supposed to read the 'evocative' music? How should we react to the sense of loss? How do we avoid the problem of nostalgia?

At times, in fact, I felt I was watching a sort of 'Left Art Cinema', which celebrates moments of Eisenstein, moments of Brecht. And rather than analysing what is going on in terms of performance in the extracts of *October* that you use, there seems to be much more a sense of recognition: we've seen this before, we know that it's important, we know that it has come out of the post-revolutionary Soviet context. The pleasure of watching this sequence is actually less the pleasure of learning something new, than of recognising the objects of desire of a left conscience. Again, in relation to this particular film extract, my response is very much determined by the use of the music, which, by the time that we listen to it at this point in the second tape, has become 'strangely familiar'.

Mark Nash: When we were working with the soundtrack here, we tried a number of different versions of the music, and we had a long discussion about how elegiac it could be. It seemed inappropriate to make it too rousing, using major chords and so on, so it's set in the minor, and it has that elegiac feel. Implicitly, I suppose, it reflects how we feel about that post-revolutionary period: it's a heroic period, and very formative in our ideas, but at the same time it's very much in the past. So the tapes try to



Left Art Cinema? A shot from *October* quoted in the *Acting Tapes*.

take us back to the period and make it present. People may object to the nostalgia, but in a way I think it's justified.

Andrew Higson: There's also a sort of celebration of constructivist design in the tapes, which presumably ties in with your feelings about this period.

Mark Nash: Yes that's right. That period is so important, and so much went on that has been forgotten, or simply isn't stated: just think of the people that didn't make it through the purges, including Meyerhold. I was very aware, when I went to Moscow, of this generation which has completely disappeared: the buildings are no longer there, there are just a few survivors left, and various artefacts – the photographs, the films, the paintings. So all this is a specific connotation of the way we constructed the tapes. And it applies as much to the first tape too, since we would want to make similar comments about Stanislavsky and theatre history.

Andrew Higson: What we're saying, then, is that the ways in which the spectator is asked to engage with the work of the tapes are actually quite complex. Firstly, there's the overall strategy of the montage of materials, which demands a fairly sophisticated attempt to hold the different elements together, and which risks being ambiguous. Secondly, there are the more specific demands made on the spectator by the voice-over, in terms of an auditory, observational engagement. You don't *identify*, rather you're kept at a distance, in the position of the observer. But thirdly, there is the seduction of identification: I kept finding myself being seduced into what kept promising to be, but in the end resisted being, a colourful naturalistic world of the actors training. I found myself identifying with the actors in the workshop sections, both as coherent personalities, who become more developed as we get to know them, and as progressively more complex actants within the drama of these bizarre experiences which you, the directors, put them through. As the exercises develop into narrative sequences, the spectator is incorporated into what promises to be a complete and coherent fictional world. But then that plenitude is broken down – the camera pans to reveal the sound engineer You constantly refuse to complete a performance, undermining our empathetic engagement, and, precisely, revealing the construction of performance.

Mark Nash: We did try to produce points of identification, then to undercut them, or frame them, or show them as constructions, and then move back into identification. It goes back to the debates around Brecht in the '70s, and the argument that alienation is never a question of simply destroying identification, but a question of creating an identification and then displacing it, but constantly coming back to it. As a strategy, it's the nearest we've got to a formulation of how to do TV.

The *Acting Tapes* will be screened with a season of related films on Channel Four's *Eleventh Hour* slot and at the National Film Theatre in London during January and February 1986.

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ARTICULATING STARDOM

BY BARRY KING

27

DESPITE THE EARLY interest shown by the Prague School, the role of the actor as re-presenter of signs has barely been examined.¹ The writing on the semiotics of acting looks very undernourished when contrasted with the literature of adulation, anecdote and reminiscence that has colonised the discussion of this aspect of the performing arts. Thus one of the main purposes of this article is to focus attention on the categories and variables that I take to be essential to the development of a semiotics of acting in film and, by extension, television. My second purpose underlies the first: I want to suggest that the kinds of variables I identify enable us to organise the materials on film acting available to us into an account that, if developed, will provide a means of reconciling a 'political economy' approach to, especially, stardom in the mainstream (Hollywood) cinema and the theorisation of the role of the star in terms of film as an interplay of representation and identification.

More generally speaking, the style of argument advanced here – which I would identify as a cultural materialist one² – aims to specify a reconciliation between the sorts of determinations that arise from economic organisation in the traditional sense of that term and the determinations that are immanent to the process of signification *per se*. Those persuaded of the absolute autonomy of the 'text' are certain to find this line of argument unappealing. On the other hand, those who take the far more cogent position that the textual production of meaning is relatively autonomous will find in what follows an attempt to isolate a specific, albeit important instance, of the subordination of the textual production of meaning to factors of economic and social control.³ The manner in which this occurs, that is, the manner in which textual autonomy is articulated, is what I will attempt to show. But the crux of my argument is that stardom is a strategy of performance that is an adaptive response to the limits and pressures exerted upon acting as a discursive practice in the mainstream cinema.

To pursue this argument it is necessary to show how stardom develops as a response to the interaction of three areas of discursive practice which I shall term economies – systems of control that mobilise discursive resources in order to achieve specifiable effects. These are: the cultural economy of the human body as a sign; the economy of signification in film; and the economy of the labour market for actors. Broadly, while I think that, in the last instance, it is the mediation of the labour market for actors that sets the limits of variation in the other fields of practice – and hence the hegemonic form of acting as stardom – these latter prac-

¹ A recent discussion can be found in Kier Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London, Methuen, 1980. In what follows I will assume for purposes of simplification the perspective of a single film actor (male or female). I wish to acknowledge the useful criticisms of the *Screen* editorial collective, particularly Andrew Higson, of an earlier draft of this paper.

² cf Raymond Williams, *Culture*, London, Fontana, 1981, p 29ff.

³ See, for example, Paul Corrigan and Derek Sayer, 'Hindess and Hirst: a Critical Review', *Socialist Register 1981* and Franco Rossi-Landi, 'Sign Systems and Social Reproduction', *Ideology and Consciousness*, no 3, 1978.

⁴ cf Erik Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State*, London, New Left Books, 1978, pp 15-29.

⁵ See the accounts in Lillian and Helen Ross, *The Player: The Profile of an Art*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1962 and Ivan Butler, *The Making of Feature Films: a Guide*, London, Penguin, 1961. For a recent statement see Tony Booth's remarks in 'All Actors Should be Working Class', *Marxism Today*, October, 1984.

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectual Field and Creative Project' in MFD Young (ed), *Knowledge and Control*, London, Collier-Macmillan, 1971.

tices present recurrently possibilities and contradictions on the boundaries of and within the hegemonic practice. In other words, stardom, a response to the labour market for actors, determines the consequences of the other processes that I identify.⁴ At the outset, it is desirable to emphasise that what follows does not constitute an analysis of a given performance nor, indeed, does it constitute a theory of performance *per se*, rather it seeks to theorise the fundamental constraints on acting as a discursive practice in film (and television) that produces a particular kind or mode of performance strategy – a strategy that must continually negotiate a way through the forcefield of other practices.

But before addressing these latter points directly, it is necessary to explore the relationship between stage and screen acting in some detail, since it is my reading of this relationship that conditions the treatment that follows.

Stage and Screen

The view that stage acting provides a yardstick against which to evaluate acting on screen is widespread among actors, even among those whose main professional activities have been confined to the screen. A common argument is that the stage is an actor's medium, in the sense that it is on the stage that the actor is best placed to realise his or her 'creative intentions' in character portrayal.⁵ While such assertions may be seen, as does Bourdieu, as conditioned by the desire to be publicly associated with an elite institution – the 'Stage', its 'Great' tradition, etc – or, alternatively, as an attempt to align acting with professions that sustain the claim to autonomy more effectively with the public at large and clients in particular. It is necessary to recognise that certain empirical features of the work situation of the actor tend to confirm the general direction, if not the elitist texture, of such a judgement.⁶

Two recurrent themes can be identified. First, that 'good' acting is based on some concept of intentionality, or even authorship. It is taken for granted that the participation of the actor(s) in the process of signification should be an outcome of the deployment of a conscious and constitutive control at the point of performance. Such constitutive control is not necessarily inconsistent with the taking of *direction*, emanating from considerations of signification at the level of the total, usually narrative, performed text, of which the actor's performance, even if a leading player, is 'merely' a subtext. But it does imply that interventions into the sub-text of the actor's performance, even if emanating from positions that are extra-discursive, should be left to the actor to articulate *within* the discursive practices of acting. It is more or less uniformly held that film (or video) presents a latent and readily actualised threat to this requirement, whereas theatre does not. Secondly, it is regularly assumed that theatre as a medium, because it entails 'live' performance before an audience and because the duration of the performance is the performance *per se* rather than the provision of materials editable downwards

into a performance given elsewhere, requires of the actor a more sustained exercise of skills and commitment than is the case where an editable medium is used. A recent representation of the 'loss' of quality and commitment entailed in shifting from stage to screen is given by Sam Shephard:

*There's a certain voyeurism about the camera. With a live audience in the theatre, an actor has to meet total physical and emotional demands, while in a film you can use little pieces of yourself and that's construed as acting.*⁷

Faced with the empirical fact of a preference for stagework over screen among actors whose occupational standing is high, the problem for a constructive analysis is to steer a path between uncritical acceptance or rejection of the datum of preferences as a mere *parti pris* and the allure of an essentialist appreciation of the media in question. Such a datum of preference, echoing Bourdieu again, is arbitrary but not gratuitous. It expresses a reaction and an adaptation within the discursive practices of acting to the organisational realities of working in the mainstream theatre and cinema. To uncover these constraints in full implies either the existence of a well-developed political economy of acting, with the delineation of its historical phases and contexts of development or a programmatic statement of what such an analysis would cover. The absence of the former and the redirection of effort implied by the latter renders such an undertaking impractical in the confines of this article. Nevertheless from an immanent perspective, it is possible to identify the operation of variables that impose a certain strategic cast on contemporary acting. One is, therefore, required to read in the actors' preference for the stage a situational logic that entails a more serious assessment than matters of status-hunger would imply.

In the first place, the discursive practice of acting, in Britain and the USA at least, is deeply implicated in the project of intentionality or the actor as a particular kind of 'knowing' subject which needs to be correctly assessed. The most concrete evidence of this implication relates to the role of practice in the training of actors, or for that matter, performers in general.⁸ The regime of exercises that constitute an actor's training, while certainly increasing his or her adaptability in respect of casting for specialised skills like juggling, dancing and so on, are nevertheless intended to increase the conscious mastery of the actor over verbal, gestural and postural behaviour. The objective of the control installed through practice is to reduce behaviours like these to a state of automaticity so that they are summonable at will in relation to consciously formulated expressive purpose. In a similar way, versatility of accent, posture, walk and other markers of difference, is *intended* to enable the actor to 'naturalise' such exogenous behaviours (or possibly, some elements of own behaviour to be used consciously in performance) as his or her own for the duration of performance in order to be convincing 'in character'.⁹ At its extreme, the prioritisation of intentionality – the intention, in this case, to communicate some 'truth' about the

⁷ Quoted in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, August 26, 1984, p 16.

⁸ cf J Bensman and R Lillenfield, *Craft and Consciousness*, Wiley Interscience, 1973.

⁹ Peter Barkworth, *About Acting*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1980, p 13.

¹⁰ D Mixon, 'A Theory of Actors', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, March, 1983, vol 13 no 1.

¹¹ cf Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London, British Film Institute, 1979, p 158. By psychological identification or behavioural imitation, respectively.

¹² Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', *Screen*, Spring 1979, vol 20 no 1, pp 13-33.

¹³ For a recent example of this incursion see Hal Hinson, 'Some Notes on Method Actors', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1984, p 200 ff.

interior reality of the character – has a Cartesian ring about it: the maximisation of conscious control over acquired dispositions, inherited characteristics (the utopia of make-up) and their conventionalised meanings in the culture at large. Taken to its extreme, and to the extent that actors, like any other occupational group, have an interest in excluding untrained entrants such an extreme has a pragmatic value, such a project leads to the requirement that:

... [the] actor must be able to be true to any conceivable character, making all actions believable and spontaneous.¹⁰

More routinely, such a project leads to the norm of impersonation. This states that in playing any character, the 'real' personality of the actor should disappear into the part or, conversely, that if the range of the actor is limited to parts consonant with his or her personality then this constitutes 'poor' acting. This latter, negatively valued converse, I shall refer to, hereafter, as personification. A number of points can be made about impersonation: for example, it seems to transcend acting styles – Method and Broadway/repertoire styles tending to propose different strategies of realisation of the same objective¹¹ – and it serves to grade positively the standing of the actor among peers. But probably the key theoretical issue relates to the concept of authorship implicit in such a project.

As Foucault has argued, the concept of 'Author' can be seen as a principle of coherence, governing the identification, organisation, circulation and reception of texts, rather than as verbal marker denoting a discrete historical identity that unfolds transparently through the text. In this regard, he writes of the 'author function' rather than the 'author'.¹² One of the key thrusts to Foucault's argument is to highlight the various ways in which the romantic conception of the author – as a unified subject purposively unfolding his or her interiority before a reader, a parallel coherence in the sphere of reception – constitutes a denial of intertextuality. Does the concept of impersonation, in fact, constitute a performance variant of the myth of the author?

My answer to this is, basically, no. To put it bluntly, so long as the contribution of the actor (or for that matter any other functionary in the process of collective production) disappears into character, then the performance text – or more strictly the text created by the ensemble of performances – can be assigned a unitary, global author. Notwithstanding this fact, the romantic myth of the author has readily and voraciously fastened itself to the world of performance by a facile, but plausible extension of the literary conception of the author to that field.¹³

The objective of performance is the re-presentation of a text through the activation of its various parts – in acting usually a narrative realised through its characters or in music the realisation of the score through the execution of its instrumental parts and so on. The relationship between the execution of the 'parts' and the ultimating 'text' may be more or less specified by the nominal author through a system of notation, but the

intrinsic relationship between the script or score is inter-textual: it is only through the performance – in reality, an ensemble of performances – that the ‘text’ is fully realised, yet each performance constitutes a specific text in itself, more or less a version or a token of the notated or written text and implicated in the discourse of the past, present and future versions of the text. Thus it is meaningful, if finally misleading, to speak of Shakespeare’s Hamlet in relation to Olivier’s or Gielgud’s Hamlet and so on.¹⁴ The notion of the author as opposed to author-function is clearly, if mistakenly operative in such formulations in the sense that it is the leading actor’s name that is used (especially when he assumes a directorial role) to indicate a specific realisation or re-presentation of the text, but neither the text nor its version constitute a definitive ‘work’ or vision transhistorically foreclosed around the intentions of the author. For actors, intentionality is doubly articulated: the actor deals with a part which is only a moment of the totality of the performances given by other actors (or other participants, a one-man show is never produced by just one individual) and that totality is itself, as already indicated, intrinsically intertextual. The actor’s intention to portray a specific character in a specific way may seem at first sight, and in the case of a leading actor is often so represented, to correspond to authorship conceived as the creative principle of the fixed, delimited text. But the process of character representation through impersonation entails that the actor should strive to obliterate his or her sense of identity in order to become a signifier for the intentionality inscribed in character. Such obliteration returns the project of intentionality to the level of the narrative itself which is usually ‘authored’ reductively in terms of the director’s or playwright’s ‘vision’, rather than as a meaning emergent from a collective act of representation.¹⁵ The full participation of the actor in the narrative as character thereby depends upon the suppression of the literary conception of the author.

The other aspect of intertextuality relates to the fact that the actor as a private individual is already constituted as a sign within the host culture, insofar as his or her behavioural and physical attributes have been read and will be read as cues to personality. The placing of the actor on stage or screen certainly intensifies this inferential process and for the purposes of a single casting may re-enforce characterisation. But overall the range of characters an actor may attempt is limited by the emphasis, rather than de-emphasis on the given-ness of her or his physical and behavioural attributes. Once again, impersonation ‘frees’ the actor for a range of parts insofar as it suppresses what in non-actors would be regarded as the authenticating markers of their personality.

These considerations point towards the conclusion that the norm of impersonation, apart from its presence as an empirical regularity in the orientation of professional actors, serves as the basic instrument of the construction of difference in acting, an instrument that renders intelligible the programme of control inscribed in the regime of practice and training that many actors undergo. Certainly attempts to define what acting is, whether on stage or screen, that are chary of defining imperson-

¹⁴ cf Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, London, Pelican, 1978, p 90 ff.

¹⁵ The complaint that actors attempt to make any role convincing, regardless of the consequences of making e.g. Eva Peron, lovable, has its origins in this displacement of intentionality.

¹⁶ Richard Dyer, *op cit*, p 165. Though Dyer stresses that his account has nothing to do with evaluation, it clearly does. See also John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, p 104 ff.

¹⁷ Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, New York, Grove Press, 1960, p 144; and on skill, on p 152.

¹⁸ cf Bill Nichols, *Ideology and Image*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981, p 82.

¹⁹ Bruce Dern has suggested, implausibly, that the actor may overcome the problem of arbitrary editorial control, given the centrality of the character he plays, by making each take the same. See J Kalter, *Actors on Acting*, Oaktree Press, 1979, p 192, and James Mason's remarks in Ivan Butler, *op cit*.

²⁰ The classic statement is A Knox, 'Acting and Behaving', in R Dyer MacCann (ed), *Film: a Montage of Theories*, Dutton, New York, 1966.

²¹ Kier Elam, *op cit*, p 131 ff.

ation as a norm of evaluation have a tautological quality. Both Richard Dyer, in his discussion of John Wayne, and John Ellis, probably more so, given his deployment of the terms under- and overacting, suffer from this fault since the terms of the contrasts they seek to advance are never established: any attempt to pronounce on screen behaviour evidently require the specification of the terms of variation.¹⁶

The impact of the technology of film on impersonation constitutes the final aspect of the situational logic that underpins the often unanalysed preference for stage over screen. Put in its bluntest form, there is a widespread belief among actors and other commentators that film as a medium regularly if not necessarily entails a deskilling process, in the sense of rendering the skills of the actor obsolete or of entailing dilution – the substitution of the untrained actor for the trained. As Edgar Morin put it:

*The cinema does not merely de-theatricalise the actor's performance. It tends to atrophy it.*¹⁷

While it's absurd to conclude as Morin does that acting in film requires no skills whatsoever, it is important to identify the transformations in the practices of acting that film technology, as routinely deployed in the mainstream cinema, entails. The impact of film on acting rests ultimately on the sheer variety of codes that can be mobilised in order to fabricate the movement (through the imaginary time and space of the diegesis) of the narrative.¹⁸ At the level of the immediate concerns of the actor, the formative capacities of film threaten to disrupt the project of constructing, from actor-located processes of signification, a psychologically consistent character. As is well known, the construction of character in film, as opposed to stage, is not usually a linear temporal process. The behaviour of the character, a supposedly coherent subject unfolding within the place and time set by the narrative, is very often constituted out of minute quanta of behaviour, repetitiously delivered (takes). Such quanta, necessary because of contractual or locational economies, are dramatically discontinuous in terms of the chronology of character and plot, e.g. the actor as character must play to a character he has never seen or act out the aftermath of an affair that has yet to be enacted. Equally, a given quantum of performance, itself a mere fraction of an action, may be greatly inflected by camera position, omitted altogether, cut and reduced, resited through editing and so on.¹⁹ Alternatively, though interrelatedly, the formative capacity of film, particularly its capacity as a medium for what Metz calls cosmorphism – sequences in which only inanimate objects appear – and the substitution of such objects for the actor as a signifier, can readily displace the actor from the action, so that inanimate or non-human animate objects signify states of emotion formally within the capacity of the actor(s) to project.²⁰

The basis of such a complaint is consistent with a psychologistic conception of character 'as a more or less complex and unified network of psychological and social traits; that is as a distinct personality' which is counterposed to the actantial view of character as a function within the

narrative as found in semiological analysis.²¹ This is undeniably the case, but it is equally the case that in mainstream forms of drama and video/film production the predominance of naturalistic conventions means that any disagreement between an actor's conception of character *vis-à-vis* the director, who may be regarded as the custodian of the actantial level of the narrative, turns around interpretation *within* a naturalistic characterology. One may with Brecht deplore the stereotypical and regressive consequences of this theatrical formation:

*Parts are allotted wrongly and thoughtlessly. As if all cooks were fat, all peasants phlegmatic, all statesmen, stately. As if all who love and loved were beautiful. As if all good speakers had a fine voice.*²²

But it confronts actors as a fact of employment and constitutes the prevalent characterological direction given to impersonation.²³

With these qualifications in view, it is important to recognise that film technology as routinely deployed confronts the actor with an effect which may be broadly identified as de-skilling. This is not to imply that acting in film does not entail the use of skills. A movement from stage to screen, in a literal sense involves re-skilling—though conversely the kinds of skills acquired by stage training are not easily mastered by those only experienced in film work.²⁴ Rather the notion of skill does not rest on some simplistic conception of a fixed technical content so much as the question of whether such content, at whatever level of complexity, is monopolisable by a specific set of workers. And whether in this context →a politics or frontier of control—the technology is implemented in a way that enhances or undermines the control of the contending parties of employees and employers.²⁵

Viewed in this light, it is clear enough that the routinised practices in the mainstream cinema tend to shift the frontier of control away from the actor towards the director or, where this is not the same person, those empowered to render the final cut. Equally it is no small matter for professional standing and employment chances that the formative capacities of film (or video) can be used to compensate for a low level of technical ability as an actor, enabling untrained actors to produce convincing on-screen performances.²⁶ Under such circumstances a preference for the theatre is not surprising. The requirement of unaided projection and the necessity of repeat performances before a 'live' audience virtually eliminates this threat in the theatre. So, too, it is in the theatre that actors have the greatest degree of direct control over the signifying direction and grain of their performance—even if this control is only unevenly realised in practice.²⁷

Again, this preference is materially reinforced by the historical priority of the stage and by the fact that where acting is taught in drama schools and colleges, such teaching has a stage bias, for obvious reasons of cost, but also because the demands of stage acting can be scaled down whereas film acting techniques cannot be readily scaled up.²⁸

²² Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (trans John Willett), London, Eyre Methuen, 1971, p 87.

²³ Richard Dyer, op cit, p 119 ff has some very astute remarks on this point, i.e. that the rejection of naturalism does not necessarily imply a 'deconstructive' approach to character.

²⁴ cf Jack Lemmon's remarks on Tony Curtis in W Hyland and R Hatnes, *How to Make It in Hollywood*, Nelson-Hall, 1975.

²⁵ See David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, Blackwell, 1982, p 109 and p 119. For a general discussion, see Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work*, London, Macmillan 1983.

²⁶ Rod Steiger makes this point in Ross and Ross, op cit, p 278.

²⁷ The use of 'live' audiences on television would have to be assessed carefully in this regard. Such performances are usually edited for transmission.

²⁸ See PK Manning and HL Hearn, 'Student Actresses and their Artistry', *Social Forces*, XLVII, 1969 and AK Peters, 'Acting and Aspiring Actresses in Hollywood', PhD Thesis, UCLA 1971.

The drift of these remarks is towards what I would term a qualified technological determinism. In general my view of technology is that it always represents a complex of potential uses, but that the social relationships of production in which it is embedded tend to prioritise particular forms of use and patterns of technological application over others. At the level of appearances such uses and applications may appear as 'givens' or as 'essences', but the apparent essence of the technology resides ultimately within the historically specific relations of production (use and application) in which the technology is embedded. It is possible to speak, therefore, of a situational technological essentialism.

Bearing this in mind, it would be a mistake to see the foregoing as resting on the view that film is necessarily restrictive and impoverishing and theatre necessarily liberative and enriching of the actor's efforts. Such a proposition only needs spelling out for it to collapse into indefensibility. To be explicit, the implementation of the formative capacities of film and video, a desirable if complex factor of its use – its ability to construct an integral diegesis and narrative irrespective of the duration and priority of the pro-filmic events it records – does not necessarily mean that acting in film is 'bad' acting. A more precise formulation is that the effects of characterisation achievable by the cumulative process of the actor's performance on stage are only sustained in film and television if measures are taken to compensate for the atomising effects of normal usage. Where such measures – e.g. rehearsals or collective decision-making – are absent, self-referential compensations arise such as playing to the camera, assumption of producer or director's role on the part of leading players and stardom. Such remedies, particularly the latter, may be individually successful, but they clearly leave the question of collective involvement unresolved.²⁹

On the other hand, the fact that in the theatre the actor maintains a direct, unmediated control over the pacing and behavioural architecture of his or her performance does not guarantee that actors have control over the total effect of the performance. Once again, it is the social relationship between the director and cast that is determinative. Thus, for example, the work of director-producers like Craig or Appia, particularly the former who wanted to rid the stage of actors, and the organisation of theatre companies in nineteenth-century Europe left the vector of control firmly in the hands of the director-producer and prioritised *mise-en-scène* over performance.³⁰ Equally, in the contemporary debate surrounding Simon Callow's manifesto for an actors' theatre³¹, it is clear that the relationship between the director and actors is crucial. Ian McKellen puts it well:

When actors are allowed to function as complete people-of-the-theatre, expressing positive views of their own work and the work of the director, they mature as individuals and as a unit. When they are primarily employees,

²⁹ VI Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, (Mayflower edition, 1958) was one of the first to recognise the impact of editing on the actor's motivation and to propose the necessity of involving the actor in the total process of production.

³⁰ See M Hays, 'Theatre and Mass Culture: the Case of the Director', *New German Critique*, 29, Summer 1983 and M Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old*, Octagon Books, 1975 p 23 ff.

³¹ Simon Callow, *Being an Actor*, London, Methuen, 1983.

*selected as the last pieces in some jigsaw plan originating in the mind of their director-manager, the audience (and the critic) may still approve of the result. But what a waste of potential.*³²

The Callow-McKellen position and the debate it inspired identifies very clearly that it is the social relations of theatrical production – the social deployment of theatre’s formative capacities, one might say – that determine the texture and level of the actors’ participation in the production of signs in the theatre. In itself Callow’s claim for actors’ control has a regressive, elitist, ring about it – the actor-writer nexus is merely to depose the director-writer nexus as a better arrangement for retrieving the ‘essential’ meaning of the text, a theatrical variant of historicism. But this particular nuance acknowledged, the substantive point that the theatre (and film/video) is a collective activity in which no discrete input should be prioritised over and against the process of collective decision making, and that actors are an important element in this process, the public face of it as it were, is defensible. Certainly a more radical variant of the actor in command argument can be identified in the writings of Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski argues that the actor is the centre of the theatre *per se*, not merely the centre of the performance. On the basis of the plausible contention that scenery, make-up and costumery are common to stage, cinema and television, and in any case, better realised by film and video, Grotowski’s ‘poor’ theatre relies centrally on the architecture of the actor’s body, voice and gesture to constitute the process of representation.³³

What such arguments demonstrate, of course, is an untheorised assumption that the maximisation of the actor’s control over the detail of his or her performance necessarily leads to an aesthetic enhancement of the totality of the text. There is certainly no *a priori* warrant for such a conclusion. For one thing, the aesthetics of performance are insufficiently developed to support it and for another, such a radical re-centring of film or video on the actor would limit the known capacities of the medium to a mere transcription of theatrical performance. Again, in the analysis of specific film texts – the only level at which it might be possible to distinguish the specific contribution of the actor to characterisation – it is by no means clear where the actor’s contribution, as opposed to the director’s, cinematographer’s, editor’s or other actors’ contributions, begins and ends.³⁴

Having provided a qualified defence of impersonation, particularly to rescue it as a usable category from those, some of whom are actors, who would use it to mask a raw preference for stage over screen, I want to take a few steps towards the understanding of stardom as a particular variant of performance in film – a variant that is, I would contend, only comprehensible as an interaction, with varying situational outcomes, of the three economies signalled at the outset of this article.

³² *Guardian*, May 4, 1984.

³³ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, London, Methuen, 1975.

³⁴ cf Robin Wood, ‘Acting Up’, *Film Comment*, vol 12 no 2, 1976.

Performance or representational arts, whether these occur in a theatrical, cinematic or televisual context, necessarily bear a relationship to the diversity of signs distributed in the culture at large. Music itself, of course, in performance is brought into such a relationship by the behaviour of the performers. Such activities are governed by specific sub-codes of representation that allow the production of signs which are understood by the performers and audience alike to bear a conventional relationship to everyday life. The exact nature of the relationship between the representational regime within the theatre and the world outside has been historically variable, but in the West, at least since the late nineteenth century, the theatre and subsequently film and television have been dominated by naturalism. Naturalism may be defined as that mode of theatrical representation that enters a strong claim that the external aspects of the individual, his or her utterances, behaviour and appearance in everyday settings, gives a privileged access to personal and collective realities.³⁵ The representational regime of naturalism has been much analysed, notably by Brecht in his polemic against Aristotelian drama or the theatre of empathy, and I do not intend to take these issues up here.³⁶ What interests me specifically is what naturalism implies in terms of acting.

If we take the familiar contrast between naturalism and more formalistic regimes of theatrical representation in which symbolic as opposed to iconic or indexical signs predominate, such as the Chinese classical or the Japanese Noh theatres, then the implications of naturalism become clear. (C S Peirce defines a symbol as signifying by convention, an icon by resemblance and an index by physical connection.) Under a naturalistic system all signs deployed in performance lay claim (however spurious) to be motivated—to be a mimesis of the extra-theatrical, extra-cinematic and so on. This mimetic relationship can be seen as a constraint on the autonomy of sign production since the subcoding of resemblance is constantly referred back to the iconic or indexical actuality of the signified—or, rather, what in such a system can be construed as the same, the perception by the audience of verisimilitude. In non-naturalistic theatre, however, the regime of signification creates its own signified(s) as it were self-consciously by the deployment of highly conventionalised systems and subcodes of reference—the audience not expecting verisimilitude (in the naturalistic sense) but an internal consistency in the relationship between signifiers and signified. Since even naturalistic regimes have their own specific sub-codes, the difference here is between a covert and overt use of signs and codes of representation and the gearing of the relationship between the signifier(s) and signified(s) as more or less conventional, more or less motivated³⁷.

In a theatrical tradition permeated with naturalism, and the American theatre is particularly notable for this development, the actor confronts problems in characterisation that relate to his or her being as a general

³⁵ See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, London, Penguin, 1971, p 271-299 and M Gorelik, *op cit*, p 47 ff.

³⁶ A Hozier, 'Brecht's Epic Form: the Actor as Narrator', *Red Letters* no 14.

³⁷ For these reasons Brecht admired the Chinese theatre and saw it as enshrining the 'A-effect'. See John Willett (ed), *Brecht on Theatre*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1977, p 136 ff.

cultural object rather than a theatrical object.³⁸ Thus it is correct to say that the actor is a re-presenter of signs in that he or she activates or de-activates via impersonation those aspects of the general cultural markers that he or she bears as a private individual for character portrayal.³⁹ The nub of these problems stems from the fact that if the theatre is to 'mirror' the street, the street is already populated with signs. So that the actor as a member of the host culture—with a given hair colour, body shape, repertoire of gestures, registers of speech, accent, dialect and so on—always pre-signifies meaning. Such a relationship creates difficulties for the process of impersonation which are well-known. Firstly, there is the pre-performance selection process of type-casting, which has a persistent tendency towards self-fulfilment—only actors who look the part get the part.⁴⁰ This relationship, which ties the actor as it were to biological and social destiny, is compounded by another in performance—the process of semiotisation: the fact that anything appearing in the frame of the proscenium arch or of the camera is by that fact invested with meaning. The difficulty here lies in the suppression of those elements of the actor's appearance and behaviour that are *not intended to mean* at the level of the characterisation.⁴¹

By contrast, in a theatrical regime where the gearing between offstage codes and onstage sub-codes is low or conventional and is consciously understood to be so by actors and audience alike, the physical qualities of the actor, as supposed characterological markers, provide a weaker constraint on casting. The application of make-up, dress and mannerisms do not require a literal defence, either iconically or indexically. Obviously enough, these differences are only a matter of degree, since as Eco has pointed out, even iconic sign-functions rely on conventions⁴². But it is still the case that naturalism offers a constraint not found in more canonical systems—systems where the distance between stage/screen are formally coded. Hence Brecht's criticism of casting cited earlier.

Finally, while it is useful to present the relationship between naturalistic regimes and the process of impersonation as in a state of contradiction, this should be seen as a problem within the discourse of naturalism. Indeed, it seems likely that impersonation has evolved out of the dominance of naturalism anyway. For although the problem of appearing convincingly as someone else is common to acting *tout court*, the notion that a great actor disappears into character without trace is clearly a reinforcement of this species of illusionism. On the other hand, naturalism does allow the possibility that 'poor' actors judged by such criteria can turn in convincing performances in which habits and genes outweigh the skills of acting as currently taught.

The Economy of Signification in Film

As pointed out above, film (and video) can reduce the actor's control over performance. On *a priori* grounds one cannot say that this is necessarily a bad thing, aesthetically speaking; much will depend on what the original

³⁸ On the dominance of naturalism in the US theatre, see GB Wilson, *A History of American Acting*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1966.

³⁹ See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Cambridge University Press, 1974, especially Chapter 6, for the history of the relationship between the theatre and the street.

⁴⁰ J Turow, 'Casting for TV parts: the Anatomy of Social Typing', *Journal of Communication*, 28, 1978, pp 19-24.

⁴¹ cf Jonathan Miller cited in Elam, *op cit*, p 77. Erving Goffman's distinction between signs given and signs given off is important here. See his *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, London, Penguin, 1971, p 14.

⁴² See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1976, p 199.

⁴³ Stephen Heath, 'Film and System: Terms of Analysis', Part II, *Screen*, Summer 1975, vol 16 no 2, especially pp 101-107.

performance was and how it is edited. But this empirical question aside, the maximisation of the formative capacities of film have been represented so far as arising mainly from the social relations of film production in the mainstream cinema. There remains the question of the features of film as a medium and how these provide, as it were, a semiotic 'conduit' for the implementation of social decisions and objectives related to control. To understand these features it is necessary to identify the point of engagement of the actor with the narrative through his or her engagement with character. As Stephen Heath has pointed out, the terms 'character' and 'actor' are ambiguous because they cover what are a whole series of positionalities in relation to the narrative. For example, following Greimas' *Sémantique structurale*, Stephen Heath discusses actants, or units of narrative grammar, that are neither specific narrative events nor characters, but structural oppositions that recur and, through their punctual recurrence, constitute and resolve the narrative as a total act. *Actants* can, therefore, be distinguished from *actors* which in this sense, to use Heath's phrase, 'are the units of discursive realization of a particular narrative' and 'animated entities . . . susceptible of individuation'.⁴³ The relationship between actant and actor is a variable one. One actor may synthesise more than one actant and, vice-versa, a number of actors may constitute one actant. Equally, it is possible to identify characters that are not actors, that have only a diegetic status as 'colour'.

Whatever the status of the applicability of literary models to the discourse of film, the distinction between units of meaning within the forcefield of the narrative, as it were, and the global units of narrativity is important to preserve. This more or less articulates the sort of contrast I have identified in relation to the place of the actor as a performer and the film as an edited text. As Heath points out, his analysis of the film as system perforce must leave on one side the development of individuation as 'character' or, in other words, the close analysis of the actors' work in the construction of a psychologically consistent 'animated entity'. But along with other writers in the area he observes that the actor is not a 'mere' entity animated by the flow of the narrative but a concrete person or actor-person. In short, there is in film a potential for increased individuation which in mainstream cinema has been epitomised by the star.

In Heath's exposition a series of distinctions are made, which are useful in framing the exposition given here:

- (a) Agent—approximately equivalent to actor in Greimas' sense, which undertakes or effects an action with narrative consequence. An anthropomorphic, cosmomorphic or zoomorphic entity which may or may not appear on screen.
- (b) Character—a subset of an agent, a personage with a more or less realised personality or psychological unity. All characters are agents but not vice-versa.
- (c) Person—the actor in the occupational sense as a physical/behavioural presence, the figurant of agent and character.
- (d) Image—the moment of stardom 'since the star is exactly the conversion of the body, of the person, into the luminous sense of its

film image'. The image constitutes the temporary triumph or excess of the spectacle centred on the person over the narrative centred on the character, with its problematic representation of imaginary coherence.

(e) Figure—the immanent possibility of the disturbance/disarticulation of the imaginary coherence generated by the confluence of character, person and image.⁴⁴

For purposes of explaining the immediate interaction between actor and medium, the variables that have a direct, as opposed to contextual, pertinence are *character*, *person* and *image*. At the same time it is necessary to modify Heath's specifications to emphasise how they represent levels of anthropomorphic meaning that are variously integrated within the norm of impersonation. An obvious modification is to allow for extension of the term *image* to cover both filmic and extra-filmic or cinematic processes of representation and their interaction. Heath's brief specification suffers from a paradoxical mixture of over-valuation and under-valuation. In the first place, it has long been recognised that to any actor's appearance and behaviour before camera, film adds its own enhancement, producing effects that while originating in the apparatus nevertheless appear to be part of the 'natural' physical and behavioural properties of the actor.⁴⁵ Such a process of enhancement, whether by omission—the gauzing out of wrinkles in close-up, 'best side' shots and so on—or by addition—low angle enhancement of stature, lighting and so on—does not merely affect stars, though these are obviously the epitomising benefactors of such processes, *but actors in general*. The element of over-valuation stems from the fact that the image on screen is itself, especially in the case of the star, usually reinforced by extra-discursive practices, or more exactly the interaction of filmic and non-filmic discourses⁴⁶. Two of these can be mentioned here. Firstly, actors tend to develop or are expected to develop a 'personality' for purposes of public interaction, which indicates that they are actors and suggests to potential employers that they are interesting and energetic people. This seems to be particularly true of Hollywood:

*Another New Yorker, an actor I'll call Kevin, was having a hard time in Los Angeles. The agents, the scriptwriters and producers don't quite get him. He played a major role in a Broadway hit, one that moreover had intellectual pretensions, but this success doesn't translate into cinemese. . . . Shy, reserved and a bit scholarly, Kevin has trouble radiating 'personality' during an interview (no one in Hollywood gets a chance to audition, that is to act; one must already be the part during the face-to-face meeting in an office). Worse, the personality he is (rather than the one he might but can't assume) somehow doesn't go with his looks.*⁴⁷

It is important, therefore, to distinguish the extent to which an actor assumes or needs to assume a valid personality for employment purposes, including in this the entire paraphernalia of body maintenance, grooming and so forth. Secondly it is also the case, always with stars, that

⁴⁴ Stephen Heath, op cit, pp 104-5.

⁴⁵ cf I Pichel, 'Character, Personality and Image: a Note on Screen Acting', *Hollywood Quarterly*, 1946, pp 25-29.

⁴⁶ 'In other words, a film is significant only insofar as it mobilises one discourse to produce effects in another'—Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling, 'On Authorship', *Screen Spring* 1979, vol 20 no 1, p 41. A more extensive treatment of the occupational determinants of stardom, from the side of the cinematic as opposed to the filmic, can be found in Barry King, *The Hollywood Star System*, Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1984.

⁴⁷ Edmund White, *States of Desire*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1980, pp 3-4.

⁴⁸ John Ellis, *op cit*, p 94. But compare his acknowledgement on p 99 that the film performance is closer to a 'pure voyeurism' than the fetishistic circulation of subsidiary materials. For a catalogue of the requests received in Hollywood see L. Handel, *Hollywood Looks at its Audience*, Arno Press, 1976.

⁴⁹ Richard Dyer, 'Four Films of Lana Turner', *Movie* 25, pp 30-52; J Damico, 'Ingrid from Lorraine to Stromboli', *Journal of Popular Film*, vol 4 no 1, 1975, pp 2-19; and Jane Clarke and Diana Simmonds (eds), *Move over Misconception*, London, British Film Institute Dossier no 4, 1980.

⁵⁰ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, *op cit*, p 100 ff.

the image on screen is already contextualised by the circulation of biographical and personal anecdotal materials that frame their appearances on and off-screen. Against this John Ellis has argued that the screen performance necessarily provides the moment of completion of the fan's engagement with the image of the star. While it is useful, nearly commonplace, to emphasise as others have done that the image of the star does not merely subsist, as Heath implies, at the level of the visual image, it is by no means clear that the animated image should be seen as the terminal point of the fan's engagement. One might with parallel plausibility suggest that the incompleteness of the cinematic experience – its presence *but* absence – leads to the phenomena of fetishistic requests and collection of indexical materials – autographs, stills, locks of hair, clothing and so on. Likewise still photography can be seen as expressing the fetishistic desire to tear the star from the submerging pull of the diegesis and narrative, the better to contemplate the image without the depersonalising intrusion of the narrative, its slippery movement through space and time.⁴⁸ One can go further than this and suggest, as studies of Ingrid Bergman and Doris Day have shown, that it is the extra-filmic discourse that has the greatest impact on the public's knowledge of the star, contradicting the evidence of what can be seen at the point(s) of performance.⁴⁹

While these considerations have yet to be adequately theorised, it is safe to say that in the case of stars (or stars to be) it is the extra-filmic discourse(s) that precedes and supersedes the mobilisation of the image-making capacities of film and to a large extent conditions the (mis-)reading of what is seen. In this connection, Richard Dyer's term 'star image' is useful, since as his analysis shows many of the devices used to privilege the presence of stars in films equally enter into the construction of character. The moment of the star image is, in fact, the moment of a proprietorial claim to such effects as though they were a property of the star as a person, a claim which subsists not primarily in what is represented on screen, but in the subsidiary literature where the image is rendered as a 'real life' property of its bearer, the actor as star.

Dyer, on the other hand, in his discussion of stars as signs deploys a global opposition between character, 'a constructed personage in film', and personality as 'the set of traits and characteristics with which film endows [characters]'. This definition, which in respect of his analysis is reader-centred, nevertheless includes audience foreknowledge, name, appearance and dress, decor and setting – codes which are not specific to film – alongside codes which are, so that his specification remains ambiguous in respect of the interweaving of the filmic and non-filmic that Heath's specifications, at least partially, preserve.⁵⁰

In order to preserve what is useful in these specifications for an analysis of acting I suggest the following modifications. The term *character* is adequate as it stands. The term *person* should be taken to include an understanding that the physical presence of the actor is already coded in the general sense of having the socially recognised attributes of an individual in the host culture (however problematic this

'fix' may be), a 'personality', and in the specific sense that this 'personality' is adapted to the exigencies of acting. In either case, I assume conformity is a condition of success. Likewise, the term *image* should be restricted to the visual impact of the film 'system' on the actor's 'personality' off screen, so that the coherence of the actor's image on screen is clearly identified as a technologically based construction. Finally, I would introduce the term *persona* to cover what Heath calls 'the conversion of the body, of the person, into the luminous sense of its film image'⁵¹. The reason for this should be apparent, but it is because what Heath terms *image* is in the case of stardom (or its intentional project) an articulation of person and image as I have redefined them. The persona, in other words, is the intersection of cinematic and filmic discursive practices in an effort to realise a coherent subjectivity.

With these background points in mind, I want now to indicate two specifically filmic processes that provide what I referred to earlier as the semiotic conduit through which social decisions affecting the standing of personae or stars are infiltrated into the filmic system. These are: hyper-semiotisation and the displacement of interiority. By the former, I mean to indicate the intensification of the process observed in theatre. The use of close shooting in the cinema invests greater meaning in the actor as a signifying mass, involving in the process of signification parts of the actor's body, such as the eyes, mouth and so forth. This means, in effect, that the actor can signify merely because he or she has automatic or physiologically given qualities, e.g. lip shape and movement, facial mass and habitual expressions.⁵² Under such circumstances, impersonation becomes the ever more refined control of fine as opposed to gross bodily behaviour. The problem here is that as one increases the scale of observation, the range of behaviours approach the uncontrollable or, conversely, mere passivity will signify. The scale of observation has conventional limits. Thus the close-up commonly goes no closer than the face, with more radical variation limited by the canons of naturalism. The face itself, which is posed in point-of-view cutting as the centre of the look as the authenticating moment of the character, is usually presented without ostensible make-up. That is to say, make-up is constructed in such a way as to obliterate its own occurrence and where possible the minimally retouched features of the actor provide the basis of the signifiatory play of depth of shot, focus, lighting and so on.⁵³ Such a *conventional* system for rendering apparently *motivated* signs seems a logical consequence of naturalism and to a large extent it clearly is. But it impacts with economic criteria, as evidenced by Jack Warner's exasperation at having paid Paul Muni so much for a performance in *Juarez* in which the star was unrecognisable.

For the actor committed to impersonation in such circumstances, the gross details of physical endowment pose severe problems since they are very often unalterable.⁵⁴ Generally speaking, the actor cannot be moved out of the naturalistic personality implications of his or her physique, however stereotypical or factually wrong these are. Ernest Borgnine can be made into a better looking Ernest Borgnine, not another Robert

⁵¹ Stephen Heath, op cit, p 105.

⁵² Cf D Thomson, 'The Look on the Actor's Face', *Sight and Sound* vol 46 no 4, 1976. Bela Balazs' *Theory of Film* is the locus classicus of this view.

⁵³ See P Stallings and H Mandelbaum, *Flesh and Fantasy*, St Martin's Press, 1978.

⁵⁴ Though there are examples of anticipatory cosmetic alteration. Joan Crawford's career provides some classic examples.



The star disguised:
Paul Muni in *Juarez*.

Redford. On the other hand, if the physical endowment of the actor *means* already and if there is an over-supply of actors of every type, there are few grounds, to potential employers, for radical interventions into the 'facts of nature'. Actors may as well content themselves with emphasising the socially recognised attributes of their type and employers select from the types so presented accordingly. The star would provide an exception to these observations in part, but such exceptions really demonstrate, in the time-honoured fashion, the presence of the rule: unless the actor has been selected for stardom or is through ageing in danger of falling out of type, radical interventions are not indicated.

In fact, the predominant tendency is for the norm of impersonation to be abandoned at the level of casting in favour of a strategy of selection based on personification – let the actor be selected by physical type anyway and let these physical attributes mean in and of themselves. In other words, the actor becomes the most rudimentary form of the sign, the ostensive sign in which the substance of the signifier is the substance of the signified: the actor is the person, has the personality, his or her appearance suggests s/he is, notwithstanding the fact that this construction relies on a first order conventionality in the culture which the actor re-presents and, sometimes, redefines.⁵⁵ Such a form of type-casting is to be found in its most pronounced and literal form in the film (and television) industry and, to a lesser degree, in the theatre.

Thus, the ideal young leading man should be aged between 19-25 years, at least 5 feet 10 inches tall but not over 6 feet 2 inches, well proportioned physically, handsome, rugged or interesting looking, have all his own teeth and hair. The idea ingenue should be aged between 18-22, 5 feet 3 inches to 5 feet 7 inches tall, possess a well-proportioned body and an exceptionally beautiful and interesting face.⁵⁶ Obviously

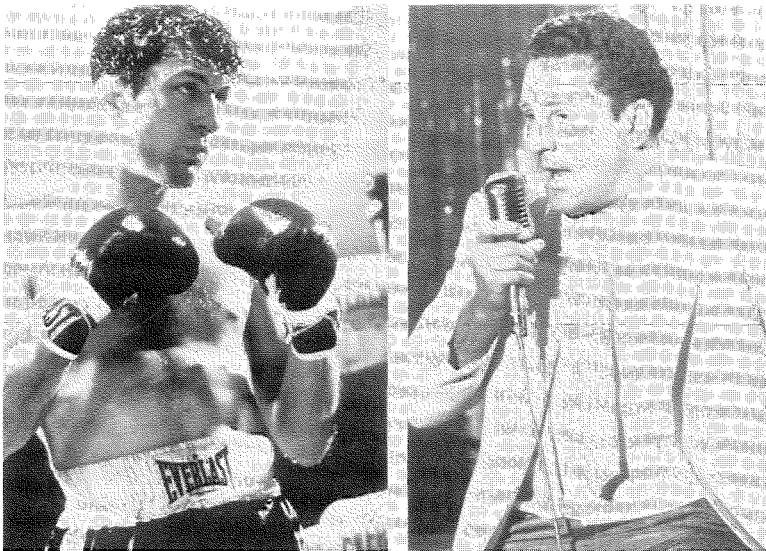
⁵⁵ See Umberto Eco, 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance', *The Drama Review* 21, 1976, p 111.

⁵⁶ See N Blanchard, *How to Break into Movies*, New York, Doubleday, 1978, p 41 ff; J Selznick, 'The Talent Hunters', *American Film*, Dec-Jan 1979, p 60; and LG Yoaken, 'Casting', *Film Quarterly*, 1958, p 36.

enough, few if any actors meet all these requirements, but this does not remove their pertinence as the criteria of selection. Again, while it might be objected that these specifications are hardly precise at the logical level, they are situationally very precise indeed. Casting directors may not be able to articulate 'ruggedness' with any precision, but they know it when they see it, which is probably the most absolute form of constraint—intuitive appreciation. Again, it is certainly the case that types change in the long term, but this does not eliminate their effectiveness in the short term. For the majority of actors the short term is all there is.

Given the selection of actors by type—a factor as we shall see advanced by labour market pressures—there follows the fact of type-casting as a serial phenomenon: actors are limited to a particular kind of character for their working life—what might be called the Elisha Cook Jr syndrome—or, at least, will be so unless vigorous efforts are made to overcome type. Just as importantly, though, actors become committed in their on and off screen life to personification in the hope that by stabilising the relationship between person and image on screen they may seem to be the proprietors of a marketable persona. Robert De Niro is an interesting case in this regard, since he appears, paradoxically, to combine to a stunning level of virtuosity the capacity for impersonation with a drive, role by role, to transform himself physically into the substance of the signified, e.g. Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*. In fact, De Niro's approach to acting is entirely consistent with an effort to adapt impersonation to the control relationships and techniques implied in film work. On the one hand:

With a play you've got that one performance that night, but if you're doing a movie it's piece by piece. You can do maybe ten takes—one or two could be exceptional—you've got the chance to get it right. I never tire of doing takes.



Virtuoso impersonation and physical transformation: Robert De Niro as Jake La Motta at different ages in *Raging Bull*.

⁵⁷ Transcript of
Guardian Lecture,
reprinted in *Three
Sixty°: British Film
Institute News*, May
1985, pp 10-11.

⁵⁸ John Willett (ed),
Brecht on Theatre, op
cit, p 48.

⁵⁹ Richard Dyer, *Stars*,
op cit.

*The main thing is the script.... Then I have to get to know the director... because it's so much work—you can be stuck with someone for six months and it's an absolute nightmare. You've got to know that you're on the same track: you can disagree, you can try it your way, their way, ultimately they edit it and it's their film....*⁵⁷

In other words, the advantages of takes are premised on the social relations of production. Clearly De Niro's commitment to Method acting gives a particular direction to his efforts to research the background and seek out real-life models for the characters he portrays. But it is at least consistent with the atomising effects of film on character portrayal that there is such a radicalising displacement towards the 'real' in order to get an authenticating sense of character outside the process of filming. The emphasis on the script points towards a similar form of monitoring device to control portrayal of character 'in pieces' and the physical transformation of the self seems the last step in the mimetic grasp of the extra-cinematic real.

The tendency for film to transform the actor into an ostensive sign, its problematic insertion into the norm of impersonation, is enhanced by the second process, the displacement of interiority. It is generally accepted that film poses limits on the representation of interiority, inclining towards behaviourism, showing the 'surface of things'. For this reason Brecht, for example, saw film as smashing the introspective psychology of the bourgeois novel and refusing ideology.⁵⁸ Such a view was clearly over-optimistic, for the mainstream cinema has developed a range of devices that reconstitute the interior space of the character, but the basic point remains: films tend to re-site the signification of interiority, away from the actor and onto the mechanism. Richard Dyer has ably catalogued these effects elsewhere⁵⁹ and I do not intend to



The broad range of
Bette Davis's
characterisations: *The
Private Lives of
Elizabeth and Essex*.

pursue them here, but this process of displacement underlies and produces the image. This means that the process of character portrayal in film, whether angled towards impersonation or personification, takes on a quasi-automatic form in which the actor's performance in part originates in his or her behaviour and in part in the action of the filmic apparatus, including in the latter lighting and camera deployment. In other words, the projection of interiority becomes less and less the provenance of the actor and more and more a property emerging from directorial or editorial decision. Under such circumstances, a potential politics of the persona emerges insofar as the bargaining power of the actor, or more emphatically, the star, is materially affected by the *degree* of his or her reliance on the apparatus (the image), as opposed to self-located resources (the person) in the construction of persona. Consequently it is plausible to speak of high and low autonomy stars to compare, for instance, Bette Davis's use of acting skills to broaden her range of characterisations, with Joan Crawford's singular pre-*Mildred Pierce* persona.⁶⁰ Similarly, the established policy of building stars from inexperienced players under the studio system, can be seen to contain an element of fabricating subordination among potential stars.

The twinned processes of hyper-semioticisation and displacement of interiority lead to a paradoxical situation: while film increases the centrality of the actor in the process of signification, the formative capacity of the medium can equally confine the actor more and more to being a bearer of effects that he or she does not or cannot originate.

The Economy of the Labour Market for Actors

The effects so far identified at the level of film have a latent status, or rather would have were it not for the effects of the labour market on actors seeking continuous and stable employment. The broad features of

⁶⁰ See Barry King, *op cit.*



The singular persona of Joan Crawford: *The Women*.

⁶¹ See Jeremy Tunstall and David Walker, *Media Made in California*, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 78. If only actors, as opposed to other performers, are taken into account employment is at 80%. See John Lahr, *New Society*, December 20, 1984 p. 468-9.

⁶² Robert Brady, 'The Problem of Monopoly', in Gordon Watkins (ed), *The Motion Picture Industry*, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, November 1947, vol. 254, pp. 125-136.

the labour market for actors in film and television are well known and have remained unchanged for decades. Wherever and whenever we look there is a large oversupply of actors, as measured by membership in the appropriate union. Thus in 1979 roughly 90% of Hollywood's Screen Actors Guild membership of 23,000 earned less than a living wage and among the membership of Equity in the UK, 70% of members are unemployed in any one year.⁶¹ Again, of those actors who do find work, there is a marked disparity between the earnings of leading players and stars, who are able to negotiate personal contracts and the majority of actors who earn at or slightly above the basic rate set by collective agreements; the magnitude of difference being in excess of fifty times, sometimes a hundred.

The ramifications of these circumstances could be explored further, but the chief point for my consideration here is that under such circumstances criteria of selection based on *discontinuous* as opposed to *continuous* variables are likely to predominate as a solution to the problem of oversupply. By *continuous* variables I mean criteria based on skills which are necessarily, albeit unevenly, distributed among the collective of actors as part of the effect of the operation of drama schools and the like. One would certainly want to qualify these criteria in terms of a distinction between kinds of performers—e.g., specialists in a particular skill, like juggling, singing and so on, who are termed 'performers' and actors and celebrities—but all of these crowding into the market with union cards do not drastically alter the overall picture.

By *discontinuous* variables I mean criteria based on the assessment of physical and psychological traits, that are accidentally combined or acquired by the individual as a member of the host culture. Such traits are susceptible to ordering on a continuous scale—degrees of bloneness, bust size, muscularity, height, etc—but their combination in the individual, even when signifying a class of attributes, is nonetheless a uniquely formed index, a property of the actor as a person or an ostensive sign of some of the values of the host culture. The emphasis on such discontinuous variables represents a rational response to the situation of over-supply. Actors of any level of ability (or even with no particular ability) compete with others who are equally well qualified. Obviously enough the very fuzziness of casting, its anticipatory nature and the fact that a character is, after all, before embodiment merely a set of notations for a performance, is an additional factor here. But as a result, competition for parts, *given the operation of naturalistic conventions*, leads to an emphasis on what is unique to the actor, displacing emphasis from what an actor can do *qua* actor onto what the actor *qua* person or biographical entity is. In this manner, what Robert Brady calls a personal monopoly is constructed.⁶²

In film, the construction of a personal monopoly rests on shifting the emphasis in performance towards personification, but such a shift takes the radical form of carrying the implications of the actor's persona into everyday life. Thus actors seeking to obtain stardom will begin to conduct themselves in public as though there is an unmediated

existential connection between their person and their image. Another way to put this is to say that the persona is in itself a character, but one that transcends placement or containment in a particular narrative (or in the case of the vehicle subordinates the narrative to the spectacle of the persona) and exists in cinematic rather than filmic time and space.⁶³ Indeed, the persona, buttressed by the discursive practices of publicity, hagiography and by regimes of cosmetic alteration and treatment, is relatively durable and if sedimented in public awareness will tend to survive discrepant casting and performances.

For actors of limited or average ability, investing their energies in the cultivation of a persona represents something within their control and a means of competing with actors who have ability in impersonation. Indeed, in the studio system impersonatory skills were assigned a lower value compared to the cultivation of personae.⁶⁴ In contemporary times, the tendency towards personification may have increased with the advent of advertising as a field of employment, which combines naturalism with the sedulous cultivation of personal charm as an ingredient in the sales pitch.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the self-referentiality of Method acting – the so-called personal expressive realism of Brando, for example – rather than representing the triumph of the actor as impersonator can be seen as a successful adaptation of impersonation to the pressures of personification, deploying impersonation to refer back to the person of the actor, the consistent entity underlying each of his or her roles.⁶⁶ The possible relationship between film acting styles and economic realities would be worth exploring in this light.

The tendency towards the formation of personae as a monopoly strategy should not be taken as unproblematic, however. As hinted earlier such processes have a hegemonic texture. The norm of impersonation maintains a powerful presence in Hollywood, for example, for a number of reasons. It is and can be seen as an integral value central to the practice of acting itself. Again, even under the most automatised conditions of production, there remains a need for actors who can ‘effortlessly’ produce performances in character – hence the remark that character actors are a ‘brassiere for the star, literally holding him or her up’⁶⁷. Nor is the adhesion to such a norm surprising, given that it provides an avenue of accomplishment for actors who do not fit into prevailing stereotypes. Accordingly, alongside the star system, the realm of the ostensive sign *par excellence*, one finds the operation of a hierarchy of character actors, whose professional reputation, length of careers and durability of earnings may outpace that of more transitory stars. Such a hierarchy provides, as it were, its own counterstars, individuals like Robert Duvall, for example, whose claims to eminence rest squarely on their impersonatory skills and character playing. On the other hand, one of the decisive and recurrent effects of casting is that a given character type will sediment itself into the actor’s personality so that the line between character and persona becomes blurred or, at least, requires extreme vigilance:

⁶³ cf Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p 67.

⁶⁴ H Powdermaker, *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, New York, Little, Brown and co, 1950, p 206.

⁶⁵ Employment in advertising is not only an alternative to ‘straight’ acting but can be very lucrative if syndicated.

⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, (Stephen Heath, ed), London, Fontana, 1977, p 75.

⁶⁷ H Powdermaker, *op cit*, p 210.

⁶⁸ Quoted in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, August 26, 1984.

⁶⁹ Christian Metz, *op cit*, p 75.

I find that the character of JR keeps taking me over in real life. Not that I get that mean, I hope, but I do find the Texas accent drifting in and out. People I meet really want me to be JR, so it's hard to disappoint them.

—Larry Hagman.⁶⁸

Finally, it is necessary to qualify the view that personification arises *solely* out of the actor's adaptation to his or her conditions of employment. Such conditions are products in turn of the interests of monopoly capital operating in the sphere of cultural production. The ramifications are complex, but basically personification serves the purposes of containing competition amongst the tele-film cartel companies by representing the star's contribution as resting on his or her private properties as a person. In such a manner, a specific production can be valorised by 'values' that are not distributed throughout the field of production as a whole—such as technical expertise, for example. The exploitation of the latter, as the latest wave of special effects pictures show, tends to escalate costs enormously. Equally, the centrality of personae (stars) as an index of value provides a form of control—shifting or ever threatening to shift, signifiers from the actor to the apparatus—over the detail of performance in favour of those who have control over the text. The readiness of actors to function as ostensive signs can be seen as a defensive strategy: by accepting the loss of autonomy (either real or merely latent) entailed in the transfer of signification from the actor to the camera, with its offscreen constraints arising from stardom as a way of life, the actor paradoxically increases the reliance of the apparatus on his or her presence as a unique object or, more precisely, a behavioural commodity. The contradictory pressures, the paradoxes of identification that are induced by the shifts between personification and impersonation rather than some diffuse notion of a fit between stardom and capitalism, as advanced, for example, by Edgar Morin, provides the basic configuration of stardom in mainstream cinema.

Provisional Conclusions

Stardom as it emerges from these considerations is a particular articulation of the relationship between the actor and role, which from the perspective of the narrative prioritises the spectacular. In terms of the theorisation of the 'look', it is clear that stardom provides a confirmation of cinematic fetishism. As Metz puts it:

*The fetish is the cinema in its **physical** state. A fetish is always material: insofar as one can make up for it by the power of the symbolic alone one is precisely no longer a fetishist.*⁶⁹

Evidently the star is one, an important one, indeed, of the ways in which the cinema, or strictly the filmic part of the cinematic, is reduced to the state of things—of stills, magazines, books of adulation that float about the act of cinematic narration.

But one of the problems raised by the analysis here is the question of

whether or not fetishistic looking—a variant of the fundamentally voyeuristic mode of looking promoted by what John Ellis calls cinematic narration—requires for its prioritisation extra-filmic, economic, pressures? Does not the prioritised incursion of the fetishistic look, a part of the experience of looking in the cinema to be sure, require explanation through extra-filmic variables? Does not the literature of stardom provide a framework and a warrant for such a reading of the symbolic which is not ‘there’ at the level of the spectatorial experience itself? Obviously such questions need further analysis.

Secondly, the non-disappearance of the actor into character threatens (and, indeed, in the case of the vehicle, achieves) the conversion of the text into a signifier for the personal ‘expressive’ reality, no less of a representation, of the key player or players. Richard Dyer has counterposed this ‘opening out’ as a challenge to the ideological work of the narrative, in that the persona of the star tends to subvert the value implications of the narrative, particularly in the area of gender identity.⁷⁰ The potential contradiction between the discourse of stardom and the narrative is in my view real and the analysis here can be taken as extending our knowledge of the situational determinants. The view of stardom as demystificatory is another matter, depending in Dyer’s case on the view that the ‘personal is political’—a formulation that seems to forget that it is the relationship between the personal and collective representations that is the space of the political.⁷¹ More to the point, such a view of stardom elides the fact that the persona of the star is a collective representation that presents/re-presents itself as the private expressivity of a unique individual. Mirroring, and taking to a new level of concreteness, the romantic notion of the author, the view of the star as the centre of cinematic meaning carries no less of a charge than these parallel constructions. Indeed, the apparent immediacy of stardom as a discourse argues for its efficacy as a demonstration of the primacy of the individual over collective relationships. More could be said on this, but the articulation of the star as a sign in the discourse of acting, rather than the impact of stardom in the audience sphere, has been my concern here.

Finally, I would like to point to the question of stardom and television. It has long been recognised, as Marshall McLuhan pointed out in *Understanding Media*, that leading players on television tend to be ‘taken’ in character by the public in face-to-face encounters. (Ironside not Raymond Burr was McLuhan’s example, Captain Kirk not William Shatner can be ours). It would be necessary to analyse further the sorts of factors, notably the duration and repeats of a single series, that underpin this difference. But it is equally the case with the TV series (e.g., *Dynasty* and Joan Collins) that the familiar shading off towards a persona is more or less parallel to what is observed in the cinema. Certainly in Hollywood both Joan Collins and Clint Eastwood are stars for purposes of publicity, agency and so forth. At the level of the medium itself (though the advent of High Definition Television may render this contrast redundant) it seems probable that the visual qualities of the film image—its clarity, its spatially mobile setting, its alternation between long and close shots—and the relative impoverishment of these features in tele-

⁷⁰ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, op cit, p 23.

⁷¹ Marshall Colman, *Continuous Excursions*, London, Pluto Press, 1982, p 10 ff.

⁷² cf John Langer, 'Television's Personality System', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 3 no 4, 1981, pp 351-365; and David Lusted, 'The Glut of the Personality', in Len Masterman (ed), *Television Mythologies*, London, Comedia, 1985, pp 73-81.

vision has a pertinence for the development of the persona. While television is a close-up medium, its visual qualities do not add 'luminosity' to the person of the star. In any case, character in television tends to be a trans-narrational entity, so that playing in character does not conflict with personification. The 'fight to be oneself' on screen, as it were, encounters no resistance from the text and hence does not move so intensively towards it. Obviously these matters are speculative and require further elaboration, as does the question of the size of the image, the condition of its reception and so on.⁷² The foregoing analysis is offered as a way into these considerations.

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FIRST ISSUE (Fall, 1985)

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Pamela McCallum

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Michael McKeon

Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel

Edward Said

Orientalism Reconsidered

William V. Spanos

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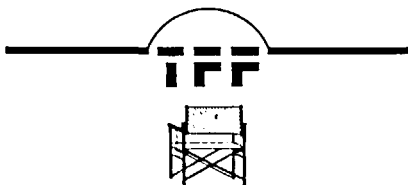
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KATHARINE HEPBURN AND THE CINEMA OF CHASTISEMENT

SIMON WATNEY REVIEWS A NEW
STUDY OF A HOLLYWOOD STAR

¹ Andrew Britton,
*Katharine Hepburn:
The Thirties and After*,
Newcastle upon Tyne,
Tyneside Cinema.
(Further references to
this title will be
included in the text.)

² Andrew Britton,
Katharine Hepburn,
National Film Theatre
monthly Programme,
December, 1984.

³ See J Laplanche and
J-B Pontalis, *The
Language of
Psychoanalysis*,
London, Hogarth
Press, 1983, p 125.

IN *Katharine Hepburn: The Thirties and After*¹, Andrew Britton develops three sets of mutually dependent arguments concerning cinema acting, the Hollywood star system and sexual politics. These are harnessed in relation to a central discussion of genre, and are most comprehensively summarised for the purposes of reviewing in Britton's own introduction to the recent season of Hepburn films which he organised at the National Film Theatre in London last December. 'All the major female stars', he writes, '(hence their importance) raise fundamental problems about the nature and status of women in our society. But Hepburn remains unique in that (a) the general political implications of these problems appear with unusual clarity; (b) it is, for various reasons, unusually difficult to produce the necessary conservative solutions to them; and (c) Hepburn continually threatens to embody *progressive* solutions which are ideologically unacceptable within the conventions of Classical Hollywood cinema'². For Britton, only *Bringing Up Baby* (directed by Howard Hawks, 1938) 'goes all the way with her potential subversiveness', and Hepburn remains significant in the 1980's because 'her presence and persona strain the categories of a male-dominated cinema to their limits. She continually forces her films to raise issues they can't properly resolve, adopt strategies they can't fully sustain and go in directions they can't possibly go.'

It should already be apparent that Britton is operating a type of criticism which is rooted in the concept of latency, its primary method being the disclosure of ideological tensions and conflicts between performance and plot, the latter assuming the place of manifest content in Freud's analysis of the dream-work³. In this respect he has no particular need for a theory of narrative as such, and has written elsewhere of his doubts concerning the standard formalist analysis of narrative which regards it as a discrete unitary phenomenon, subject only to its own internal structures and rules. By the same token he is equally sceptical of any attempts to treat narrative as if it were the central and all-determining factor in the generation and articulation of cinematic meaning, as if articulation=meaning/closure, in some kind of social and historical

vacuum⁴. This review separates his three principal areas of theoretical concern, since they are presented as accumulative arguments drawn across the text of his book, and the long career of Katharine Hepburn.

ACTING

In a characteristically discerning aside to his discussion of Hepburn's performances in the 1930s, Britton points out that 'the very concept of "mis-casting" may well serve to naturalise the explicit appearance of ideological contradiction rather than its successful elision, just as the sense that an actor is "ideally cast" may indicate that the critic is under-writing the projects of the film' (p 28). Both terms have frequently been used of Hepburn at different stages of her working life, and their repetition is significant. They chart the gradual transformation of her repeated position as an oppositional figure in such films as *Christopher Strong* (directed by Dorothy Arzner, 1933) and *A Woman Rebels* (directed by Mark Sandrich, 1936), into an icon of all-American feisty endurance in such vehicles as *Rooster Cogburn* (directed by Stuart Millar, 1975) and *On Golden Pond* (directed by Mark Rydell, 1981).

In the second chapter of his book, Britton provides a useful reading of the '30s Hollywood fan magazine and gossip column literature which were critically important in the framing of a star's ongoing public profile, or persona. In Hepburn's case a public image was established in which the central terms were 'eccentricity', 'youthfulness' and a certain Bryn Mawr class ethos. At the same time the early parts to which she was assigned, and over which she soon exercised more control than Britton allows for⁵, repeat the implication, as he puts it, that the 'fulfilment of heterosexual desire, far from seeming synonymous with self-realisation, appears in crucial respects at odds with it; desire for men imposes on the character, in her social situation, forms of behaviour which conflict with those entailed in the fulfilment of other kinds of desire' (p 29), such as career satisfaction, political esteem, friendship with other women and so on. Again and again Hepburn is seen to 'play' at modes of conventional femininity which never adequately fit her, in such a way that the notion of femininity itself is revealed as a series of cultural and economic roles, rather than an inflexible biological *donnée*.

Throughout the early and middle stages of her career, Hepburn's acting is seen to open out ideological ruptures between her given dialogue and her ostensible role in the narrative. Thus, for example, in *Summertime* (directed by David Lean, 1955) Britton notes that her acting increasingly runs against the grain of the film's casual misogyny: 'the problem arises because Hepburn's intensity gives the woman's psychological anguish—the cost of that conflict for *her*—a dramatic centrality which the film cannot properly sustain' (p 104). Throughout his reading of Hepburn's career, Britton is admirably sensitive to such examples of 'excess' in her acting. As he argues, we become more preoccupied than the script or *mise-en-scène* seem prepared for with 'the intolerable nature

⁴ See Andrew Britton, 'The Ideology of Screen', *Movie* no 26, p 26.

⁵ See Gary Carey, *Katharine Hepburn: a Biography*, London, Robson Books, 1983, especially on her relationships with screen-writers Donald Stewart and Garson Kanin. In most other respects a singularly foolish book.

Acting as counter-text: Katharine Hepburn in *Summertime*.



of the woman's situation and the rationality of her hysterical response to it'. Thus, in *Summertime*, 'the film makes us feel that Jane's desire makes her appallingly vulnerable, and gives the fierceness of her resistance, first to the indulgence of romantic fantasy, and then to the desperate impulse to believe that Renato embodies it, a weight and logic which over-ride the film's attempt to devalue it. The performance implies everything that the film cannot afford to admit' (p 104). In this respect Hepburn's part is understood as 'an exemplary case of acting as counter-text', creating 'complexities which the film needs to suppress', thereby making its 'project untenable' (p 104).

Britton's approach to acting thus requires that we make firm analytical distinctions between the 'real' historical *person* of the actor or actress, the *persona* which is constructed about them via publicity and their associations with particular types established within the system of genres, and their individual *parts* in individual films. It is from this triple articulation, as we may fairly designate it, that the star's meaning emerges, never entirely present or coherent, in the context of a film industry which presupposed 'an enormously sophisticated intimacy with the conventions of genre' on the part of its potential *and* actual audiences. Whether or not that same degree of intimacy survives today, it remains the acting persona which permits the possibility of counter-textual meanings to emerge through 'excess' or, conversely, 'under-playing'. It equally allows the double-elaboration of an intended meaning – a message within a message – as in the celebrated example of Hepburn's part as Terry Randall in *Stage Door* (directed by Gregory La Cava, 1937), in which the fictional character triumphs in a stage-role which closely parodies a part in an actual stage play, *The Lake*, in which Hepburn herself had ignominiously failed in 1934. The point which Britton is elaborating is that

widely different social and cultural assumptions and expectations were built into the personae of different Hollywood actresses. These expectations, like the star-system itself, are held to be 'premisses on theatrical melodrama' in which characters personify values, or the social groups of which they are understood to be representative, in a manner which 'is closer to allegory than realism' (p 102). 'Melodramatic acting', he continues, 'is a function of this understanding of persons. Characters in melodrama are defined not only through their narrative functions and their, as it were, epigrammatic enactment of a social position . . . but by elaborately formalised codes of performance.'

Hence the significance of Britton's overall analysis of acting to his theorisation of genre or, to be more precise, to the relations between genres. Questioning Richard Dyer's analogy between a genre and the set of a given star's parts, or vehicles, Britton argues forcibly that 'on the contrary, the existence of a genre, *and of a relation between the genres*, is a prior condition of the vehicle' (p 67). He accuses Dyer, and Robin Wood, of effectively setting up a descriptive theory of discrete genres, as they present themselves, whereas he argues that the differences between genres are far from absolute. Thus, 'in an apparently paradoxical but very real sense, they are different *because* of what they have in common, not in spite of it. The common ground is that profound politics of interpretations within the culture—ineliminable because germane to the culture—which assigns conflicting meanings to a single term or sets of terms. Each genre seeks to regulate this conflict by organising particular "forms and keepings", and appropriate expectations, whereby specific manifestations and resolutions of contradiction appear as properties of the generic world' (p 68).

This point calls to mind Lucio Colletti's observation that many Marxists 'have consistently failed to distinguish between genuine contradiction and what is no more than a conflict of natural or social forces, and hence have lost their grip on the specifically *logical* nature of contradiction'⁶, and Britton consistently uses the terms, 'conflict' and 'contradiction' throughout this text as if they were simply synonymous. Nonetheless, his discussion of anti-naturalistic melodramatic acting conventions *across* the genres is immensely valuable and timely, insofar as it offers the reinstatement of acting as a subject for serious attention in all debates concerning identification and spectatorship—debates which have been miserably impoverished in recent years by their dependence on ludicrously over-simplified assumptions concerning the ways in which individual actors and actresses might be seen to 'represent' men and women as such. Arguments concerning the possibility or otherwise of cross-gender identifications in the cinema cannot hope to proceed beyond abstract speculation until they are prepared to incorporate a historical semiotics of acting into their purview. We also need an adequate explanation for the massive dependence on naturalistic theory in Hollywood's accounts of itself, a theorisation of how and why Hollywood continues to 'think' its own acting conventions in terms which predate the invention of the steam-engine.

⁶ Quoted in Peter Dews, 'Misadventures of the Dialectic', *Radical Philosophy* no 18, Autumn 1977, p 10.

At the beginning of his fourth chapter, Britton observes that the personae of many of the most celebrated Hollywood female stars are 'strikingly out of true with dominant social norms of "femininity"' (p 39). His problematic application of the sociology of gender will be discussed in the context of a separate consideration of the overall sexual politics of cinema which he proposes. It is, however, important to recognise that his approach to the star system is heavily dependent on the approach to acting already summarised. The great advantage of his central emphasis is that it provides him with a firm conceptual basis through which to dismiss clichés concerning the notion of 'sexual ambiguity', especially when applied as a blanket term to categorise such vastly disparate screen personae as signified in the careers of Garbo, Dietrich, Davis, Bacall and of course Hepburn herself. If we accept that our understanding of the relations between genres is a prior condition for a star vehicle, it is an entirely logical step to conclude that such vehicles, as Britton puts it, 'constitute a distinct sub-set, more or less highly individuated, of conventional relations which always precede the star' (p 67). What he is trying to avoid is the assumption that star vehicles are in any meaningful sense 'like' genres. This is fundamental if we want to think about counter-textual meanings which derive from casting, such as the example he cites of Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again*, in which, he argues, she 'brings to the film the theme of song/dance as a positive return of the repressed characteristic of the musical, and in so doing generates an ambivalence within the film's definition of the old town from which it never recovers' (p 71). In other words he wants, understandably, to be able to analyse the specific meanings which are generated in the conjunction of Dietrich and James Stewart within the western genre at a particular moment in the histories of their individual personae.

Hence the significance of his extended public debate with Richard Dyer in these pages, a debate which seems unnecessarily personalised. Indeed, throughout the book a certain querulous and regrettable over-sharpness of tone is frequently encountered. This is all the more unfortunate since it tends to distract from the larger issues with which both Dyer and Britton are struggling. It is, however, clear that whereas Dyer's work offers a broadly sketched approach to the entire social and semiotic phenomenon of 'stardom' as such, Britton is working on a much more restricted palette, and only wishes to theorise the star system insofar as it may help to clarify what he describes as 'a fundamental proposition of this book that even films whose *intention* is conservative can leave room, in the very pursuit of their project, for unauthorised use' (p 69).

As I have suggested, Britton's theorisation of the star system is intimately connected to his attitude to genre. The range of genres is recognised as a system of differences, but these differences are not seen to be internally determined in such a way that the genres emerge as autonomous entities. Rather, the range of genres signifies the various organised sets of inflections by which the institutions of commercial

cinema 'make sense' of the social world. The same figure, or motif, will assume different meanings according to the context of the genre in which it appears. In other words it is the function of the genres to refract and articulate the social according to the values and expectations which they establish in relation to one another. Britton's interest in the star system is subordinate to his inquiry into the ways in which particular stars may embody or mediate particular tensions or conflicts which are always latent within particular genres. Hence the significance of the concept of countercontextual casting, through which we gain access to the 'hidden agenda' which is inscribed within a given genre—for example, Hepburn's role in *Summertime*, or Robert De Niro's in *New York, New York*.

The star is never then entirely 'within' his or her role: there is always the triple articulation of actor, persona, and part, all of which are mediated through and work upon the genre in which he or she is appearing. Britton's comparison of the thematics of Bette Davis's and Katharine Hepburn's '30s films is in this respect exemplary (pp 71-79). His concentration on the counter-textual possibilities opened up by a star system which allows certain actors and actresses a degree of relatively autonomous control over the meaning of their own parts, in greater or lesser degrees of opposition to a film's overall project, does however make it difficult for him to deal with films where Hepburn consciously colludes with a conservative or downright reactionary scenario. Hence the speed with which he passes over *The Philadelphia Story* (directed by George Cukor, 1940), which was based—as Andrew Sarris has observed—on a play which 'was about Katharine Hepburn *herself*, and what the American people thought about Katharine Hepburn in 1939, and what Katharine Hepburn realised she had to do to keep her career going'. And he is surely correct in his conclusion that it marked the beginning of her 'domestication and emasculation with her own consent and even collaboration'⁷. In this respect Britton's claim that 'the various phases of a star's career are implicit in the others' (p 96) needs to incorporate the possibility—as in Hepburn's own case—that a star's persona can put them out of work altogether. But, as I have suggested, Britton is not interested in the complex ratio of ideology to economics via the box-office which is an inevitable corrective to the possibilities for counter-textual acting in any commercial capitalistic film industry. He thus overlooks the very area in which Hepburn presumably took the greatest risks—her relation to the studio system as such. It is only by taking her career as a *fait accompli*, an object abstracted for critical attention from its commercial engagement, that he can conclude that each phase of it 'can be regarded as a specific attempt to solve the problems produced by the ideological material organised in the persona, and given that the range of possible permutations is determinate, we might expect that any particular one will be accompanied by the shadow, more or less pronounced, of its counterparts' (p 96). This seems to me to come perilously close to just the kind of 'instinctual formalism' which he attacks so sharply elsewhere in his own book (p 68).

⁷ Andrew Sarris, 'The Premature Feminism of Katharine Hepburn', *Village Voice*, August 26-September 1, 1981, p 39.

It is therefore significant that he reserves his strongest opprobrium for *The African Queen* (directed by John Huston, 1951) which he finds particularly distasteful since it offends at precisely the level of latent content which is his sustained object of attention. *The African Queen* 'has learnt from the Hepburn/Tracy movies all that it is capable of learning from them – which is to say that it has acquired a formula for the representation of the heterosexual couple. The film proceeds to extrapolate this formula from the real ideological tensions which, however confusedly and inadequately, the Hepburn/Tracy films seek to organise, and reduce it, with arch knowingness, to a show-case for its stars' (pp 100-101). Britton has no time for the star turn *per se*. He writes about Hepburn because she, 'like all classical stars, is a term of the genres and their interrelation: her work is cast within conventions which, while they serve conservatively to control contradictions, do so in a way which is peculiarly liable to expose it, and may be employed to dramatise it' (p 109). For all its significance, such an analysis leaves him entirely unable to account for either the actual popularity, or the determining factors governing the employment (or otherwise), of the female stars of the '30s.

SEXUAL POLITICS

A particular theory of sexual politics motivates Britton's overall project. Those familiar with her films will agree that 'the extreme difficulty of getting Hepburn's characters married is apparent from the very beginning of her career' (p 96). A key text in this account is *Sylvia Scarlett* (directed by George Cukor, 1936). Here, Britton points out, 'Sylvia faces a choice between acting in a way which seems authentic for her and feel-

Sylvia Scarlett: the double-edged pleasure of the heroine's 'masculinity'.



ing inferior, and acting as women are meant to and feeling monstrous'. He regards this dilemma as 'created by the form of patriarchal capitalist relations. Her desire for men is real enough, but the social conventions which mediate it construct a necessary self-alienation whereby "masculinity" is retained at the cost of a sense of freakish aberration and heterosexuality at the cost of self-abnegation' (p 44). What is at stake here is the meaning we attach to the concept of 'choice', in relation to questions of gender identification *and* sexual object, and the problem turns around the implied reciprocity of desire and 'the social conventions which mediate it'.

Throughout his study Britton argues that Hepburn's persona effectively contests both the gender system and the organisation of sexuality which inform the projects of the films in which she appears. Unfortunately, he treats both as if they were merely held in place by social conventions, as in his claim that lesbianism is 'potentially available to all women' (p 40). These problems are most acutely expressed in his fourth chapter entitled 'Gender and Bisexuality', where he begins by quoting (presumably approvingly) from Freud's *Three Essays On Sexuality*⁸ to the effect that it is the exclusivity of object-choice as such which is in need of explanation, rather than the choice of actual objects. The choice of quotation directs him to the vexed issue of 'the gender ambiguity of many of the great female stars: Garbo, Dietrich, Hepburn, Crawford and Stanwyck'. Here Britton is refreshingly impatient with vulgar attempts to read off such characteristics as 'aloofness' or 'directness' in the persona of an actress as signs of lesbianism, while judiciously adding that 'it is certainly true and important that these stars can be appropriated by particular spectators for the discovery of lesbian sexuality' (p 39). Where we part company is in his interactionist argument that both identification and object choice are *primarily* the products of 'a conflict of real social forces . . . a struggle in which all the parties are social agents':

Freud's account of the Oedipus complex habitually ignores the fact that it is directly determined by needs, demands and pressures exerted by the parents. . . . (p 33)

In this argument, Britton effectively elides the social and the psychic, allowing no autonomy to the latter regime.

According to Britton, 'it has been central to the politics of the gay and women's movements to contest the ideologies which define gays and women exclusively in terms of their sexuality', and he proposes that 'the positive corollary of such an emphasis must necessarily be that gay sexuality and "femininity" are neither what they are valued as being nor the "property" of gays and women'. It therefore follows for him that 'the only way in which the category "homosexual" can be superseded is through insisting on, and affirming, its sexuality, while denying that this sexuality is specific to homosexuals' (p 40). He wishes, rightly in my view, both to affirm the directly sexual component of homosexual experience in order to counter both moral puritans and lesbian-feminist

⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality' (1905), *On Sexuality*, London, Pelican, 1977.

⁹ I am grateful to Mandy Merck for her advice at this point.

¹⁰ For a critique of 'essentialist' positions, see Kenneth Plummer, 'Going Gay: Identities, Life Cycles and Lifestyles in the Male Gay World', in J Hart and D Richardson (eds), *The Theory and Practice of Homosexuality*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p 94. For a response, see Simon Watney, 'Balancing Act', *Gay News* no 224.

arguments which seek to separate lesbianism from any taint of sexual pleasure, and to challenge the presumption of innate object choice. But such arguments do not warrant an every-woman-can style of politics.

I would certainly agree with Britton's general proposition that we need to insist upon a non-naturalist explanation of *all* adult sexuality. It is, however, equally important to re-emphasise the central point of Freud's writings on bisexuality, namely, that object-choice of any exclusive kind requires a degree of censorial closure on earlier libidinal mobility, memories or traces of which will persist in the unconscious, variously sublimated and/or displaced in the forms of fantasy. This psychic loss is the inevitable consequence of Oedipal negotiations on the part of the individual as s/he is drawn into adult subjectivity across the signs of sex difference, and their social meanings. It is simply a species of 'psychic voluntarism', though, to imply (as I read it) that the representation of these contradictions of desire will enable the relinquished possibilities to be taken up in social life.⁹

Britton is unremittingly hostile to the category 'homosexual', understood as an attribute of a particular type of person defined by the fixity of their object-choice, and rejects the description of adult desire as organised around two fundamental, opposing and immutable sets of object-choices. But his understandable objections to the institutional/medical/legal origins of the modern category of homosexuality seems insufficient grounds on which to deny the organisation of adult desire to which it (inadequately) refers. It is one thing to decry, most eloquently, the Lacanian naturalisation of the Symbolic, in which

Having eternalised the objectification of women as castrated, there is little left to do but locate the essential Woman in a perpetual off-stage 'outside the law', where she will doubtless grow old and grey waiting for a cue that never comes, and obtaining the modicum of satisfaction available to her by 'jamming', through the folds of her veil, the language of the actors who are fortunate enough to have been given a part. (p 41)

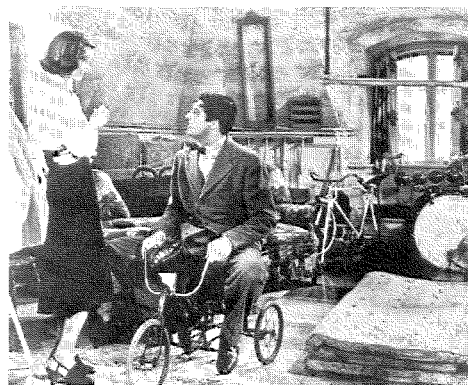
But it seems to me that a spurious analogy is being drawn here between Lacan's biologicistic model of the castrated Eternal Female, and so-called 'essentialist' theories¹⁰ which seek to account for the stubbornness of adult object-choice. Furthermore, the whole idea that the transformation of contemporary gender-roles and expectations would lead to some spontaneous and wholesale release of a joyous universal bisexual disposition suggests an essentialism far more insidious and preposterous than anything to be found in the writings of Lacan. What Andrew Britton will not accept is the irreducibility of desire to the social circumstances in which it finds itself. In his urgency to find a mythical dimension of bisexuality in Hepburn's persona, he all too often overlooks the constant motif of heterosexual sado-masochism which informs so many of her vehicles.

Britton argues, correctly I think, that Katharine Hepburn is uniquely able to articulate alternative narrative solutions to those which are

actually foisted on her in the narrative closure of her films. She stands for a certain type of 'free woman' in her early films, until her persona is eventually overwhelmed by its very longevity, transforming her into an icon of survival itself, yet another version of the American Dream which successfully represses the history which determined it. In this reading of her career, *Bringing Up Baby* (directed by Howard Hawks, 1938) becomes the central text, the exemplary Hepburn movie, in which her persona is allowed its freest rein. Yet there are certain difficulties with such a straightforward interpretation, and one might well argue that in fact *Bringing Up Baby* is an aberrant text in the Hepburn canon, insofar as it eschews the sadistic line of parts which endlessly discover new ways by which she may be cajoled back into conventional romantic relationships, and what is more, be seen to collude with her own oppression in the name of romantic love. This theme explains the peculiar conflict between pleasure and displeasure which most of her films arouse. Britton argues that 'only *Holiday* [directed by George Cukor, 1938] and *Bringing Up Baby* attempt to define a heterosexual relationship which is actually in line with the tendency of the persona rather than a check on it' (p 96). Such a conclusion is not, however, incompatible with the proposition that the two films in question stand alone in resisting the tendency of the same persona to be bludgeoned into matrimonial happiness on terms imposed by the groom (not least because he too is, in *Holiday*, and becomes, in *Bringing Up Baby*, complicit with the heroine's infantilism and willful 'craziness').

In other words, I am suggesting that the Hepburn persona is less stable than Britton maintains, and remains open to a less *internally* consistent interpretation than he seems prepared to admit. His conclusion, that the persona of that later films permits 'the possibility of a bourgeois myth of the permissably independent woman' (p 107), evades the possibility that this same myth underpins her entire career. We might fairly conclude that Hepburn's peculiar genius lay in her ability to confound audience expectations concerning the narrative structures which hold the ideology of romantic love in place across the genres as the essence of self-fulfilment and social success. In this way we can do justice to Britton's work on both acting and genre, a justice which he does not always allow him-

Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant in *Bringing Up Baby* (left) and *Holiday*: a heterosexual relationship which is not a check on the heroine's persona.



self. Such a reading may also go some way to explain the periodic bouts of unpopularity which are such a significant aspect of the Hepburn persona, as well as the modifications of that persona across her career.

CONCLUSION

Katharine Hepburn is a privileged victim in the history of commercial cinema, understood as a spectacle of female chastisement. Of *The Iron Petticoat* (directed by Ralph Thomas, 1956), which is a re-make of the Garbo vehicle, *Ninotchka*, Britton points out most acutely how 'the very title [...] tells its own story. Behind the Iron Curtain lies an unpenetrated plenitude: the Soviet Union is the unfuckable and the independent woman the Red Menace in the language of desire. Russians and feminists must be punished, first of all for not wanting what they ought to want, and then, since they really want it after all, punished further by being unable to have it.' The interest of the film for him lies in 'its assimilation of the project of Hepburn's spinster films to McCarthyism' (p 98), but he fails to notice its generic relation to so many of her earlier movies, for example *Christopher Strong* and *A Woman Rebels*. What we are openly invited to enjoy in the typical Hepburn movie is the spectacle of an independent woman brought down to size, punished, and made to understand the error of her previous ways. That her acting persona leaves us less than convinced in the morality of the narrative closure which relentlessly bears down upon her is the measure of her extraordinary achievements as an actress, achievements which Britton's own work makes it much easier for us to understand and explain. Her films undoubtedly extend our awareness of the injustices of gender, dramatised in the over-generalised and over-simplified forms of melodrama. What we witness in most of her roles, throughout her career, are the divisions and conflicts of subjectivity, thrown up, as it were, in high relief against the crude outlines of the parts in which she is cast.

Andrew Britton's analysis of the place of acting in Hollywood cinema offers a particularly fruitful antidote to the tendency to employ over-literal notions of sexism, detected exclusively at the explicit level of narrative, and his analysis of genre provides an equally salutary reminder of the dangers of extreme structuralist formalism. I hope that I have done justice to the usefulness of this study and the unusual clarity of its expression. But finally, two quibbles: *Christopher Strong* and *Mary of Scotland* (directed by John Ford, 1936) are not the 'only films in which the character dies' (p 22). She is murdered at the end of *Keeper of the Flame* (directed by G  orge Cukor, 1942). And the maxim about men making their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing, comes not from Engels but from Marx, in the second paragraph of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.



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¹ *Screen* Summer 1978,
vol 19 no 2, pp 55-69.

A FEW YEARS AGO *Screen* published a piece of mine called 'Screen Acting and the Commutation Test'.¹ The following notes are an attempt to suggest how that piece might be followed up. Something was wrong with it, as its almost total sterility in terms of uptake proves. It has turned out to be unworkable-with, as much for me as for other readers. Yet what it said, as far as it went, still seems to me to be true.

The article argued that a view of signification in which 'difference' plays the central role could usefully be applied to screen acting. Such a view—nowadays sometimes nicknamed 'diacritical'—derives from the work of the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. The central idea, putting it quickly and crudely, is that, just as language only works as a result of our grasp of the significant differences between one sound and another, so other meaning-conveying codes can be analysed as products of 'the play of difference'. Just as 'p' contributes to the meaning of 'pin' through *not being* (being different from) 'b', and thereby the signifier for a largish unglamorous receptacle is distinguished from the signifier for a small sharp object, so Charlton Heston contributes to the meaning of *Touch of Evil* through not being (i) John Wayne, (ii) Clint Eastwood, (iii) Jeremy Irons, (iv) Barbara Stanwyck.

The obvious problem with the analogy is that, while the phonologist deals with a limited repertoire of sounds in any given language, the series of Heston alternatives (which is what the commutation test puts into play: you substitute another actor in your mind and reflect on the difference that substitution makes) is open-ended. Another problem is that, while as speakers of English you and I have a common sense of what the upshot of the p/b distinction is in an '—in' context, as viewers of films we might have wildly divergent intuitions as to what a young Brando *Touch of Evil* might have been like.

These considerations certainly suggest that a diacritical screen acting semiotics isn't going to be as tight a descriptive discipline as phonology. But that wouldn't keep the analogy from being illuminating to a point, just as thinking of light as waves has turned out to be illuminating to a

point. I would stand by the earlier essay's claims that (i) there is a stratum of meaning on the screen which is best elucidated by imagining how else the screen might have been filled, and (ii) how else is as sensible a question to pose to the acting as to the editing, the *mise-en-scène*, the narrativisation, and so forth.

The sterility of the earlier essay's approach, I now think, is not a matter of the weakness of its analogy, but of its failure to think through those parts of screen acting that the analogy doesn't reach, so as to show how the diacritical stratum relates to the not (or not obviously) diacritical. Saussure argued that the sound-stratum of language could be analysed in terms *only* of difference. Whether or not this is so of sounds, it is hard to maintain that it is so of the totality of a performance.

2

At an early stage in drama courses I have often found it highly instructive to send students out on a field trip to make a study of people as they go about their daily business. A high street is a good place to track down quarry. Students are asked to seek out, study and report back on two contrasting characters. The task is to observe them closely, but not too closely—as one student was severely clouted after trailing someone too obviously. The students are asked: to note sex, estimate age and physical condition; to consider how the sex, apparent age and physical condition appeared to influence movement and gesture; to indicate what they thought the clothing revealed about the character; to say whether movement and manner were in accord with the clothes; to note characteristics and mannerisms; to try to guess occupation, status and life style; to listen to voice and speech and note what they revealed; and finally, to note the character's attitude and to comment on whether this was reflected in both voice and movement. When the students have had time to think about their two characters, they are asked to describe them as vividly as possible to the rest of the group and then to characterize them, using movement, gesture, voice and speech to recreate incidents which show the contrast between them.²

This is a paragraph from a recent handbook aiming 'to provide a range of ideas for practical work in the drama studio'³; that is, to contribute to the formation of professional actors.

The diacritical aspect of the exercise is obvious enough. 'Two *contrast-ing* characters'; '*contrast* between them'. What is involved over and above the diacritical is equally striking. *Positivities* of each character are to be reported on. (By a 'positivity' I shall be referring to that which is what it is independently of the network of difference, of any relation to what-is-not.) Age, sex, physical condition are first taken as positivities (sex the most positive of all: the other two have to be 'estimated'). An inner-outer dialectic is set up: what influences what, what reveals what, what is in accord with what? First description, then the particular work of the actor, re-creation ('movement, gesture, voice and speech': just how

² John Miles-Brown, *Acting: A Drama Studio Source Book*, London, 1985, pp 11-12.

³ *ibid*, p 9.

redundant is this list?). Whatever one thinks in detail about the semiotics of the person implicit in the paragraph, its main drive is both clear and, I must admit, unchallengeable: the student is to address herself to imitating the positivities, to being as-if-the-same-age, as-if-the-same-sex, as-if-with-the-same-voice, and ultimately as-if-with-the-same-attitude.

What then does the contrastive element of the exercise contribute to it? Why aren't the students simply told to come back with a single 'study'? This is really the question already posed: what relationship can there be between positivity-imitation and contrast-awareness that enables the latter to contribute pedagogically to the former?

3

For a quick sketch of some non-diacritical aspects of performance, it may be enough to distinguish three sorts of 'meaning' conveyed by actors which seem to depend on positivities. I shall term these indexical meaning, iconic meaning⁴, and category meaning.

Indexical meaning is what fascinated André Bazin: someone was really out there, pro-filmically, interacting with the mechanical apparatus to produce the image. Imagine yourself filmed: the meaning of that record is surely not dependent on your difference from Charlton Heston, Barbara Stanwyck, your mother, your brother, your uncle Tom Cobley

Iconic meaning has been rather less mulled over in film theory. The key notion here is that an actor might try to constitute a *picture* of someone else, just as a painter might try to capture two-dimensionally the likeness of someone. I was alerted to this performance aspect by hearing a radio interview with Donald Sinden in which he described some of the problems associated with playing Henry VIII on stage; he recollected that much of the actor's energy has to go into contriving to *look like* the Holbein portrait of Henry VIII which everyone somehow seems to have internalised. The trick here must be to achieve the imitation of a checklist of features characterising a previously existent person. One does not play the mature Marx without growing or putting on a bushy beard.⁵

Note that iconic meaning is dependent upon indexical meaning except, perhaps, in the case of direct imitation. An example of such imitation would be John Miles-Brown's students working 'from the life' in bringing back to the studio an imitation of a particular hapless passer-by. But without independent portrait evidence, would we experience the student impersonation as 'meaning' an individual? Or would we take it to signify a *type* – which would carry us into our next category? Scenarios in which an actor becomes a primary portraitist of a particular person are actually rather hard to imagine.

Moving on to category-meaning: suppose the target of the imitation is not the Henry VIII-ish but the regal. Some sort of checklist is involved again, but one with fuzzier edges. Regality can include Sinden-as-Henry VIII, Douglas Fairbanks Jr-as-Charles II; it almost certainly cannot include Jerry Lewis in a '50s-'60s-type performance;⁶ one can imagine

⁴ 'Indexical' and 'iconic' are used here in the sense which derives from C S Peirce via Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1972, pp 122-125.

⁵ Perhaps one should.

⁶ The Lewis of Scorsese's *King of Comedy* could, in a different narrative, be a king (type: gloomy).

(not very interesting) debates over whether or not it includes Michael Hordern in the BBC *King Lear* ('He's a fine actor, of course, but somehow not very *regal*, you know').

A good example of category-meaning work in acting classes is provided by another Miles-Brown exercise, entitled 'Encounters'.

*The tutor has a list of type characters and allocates one to each student by simply pointing out the name from the list, without speaking. Thus no one knows what the others will characterize At no time during the playing of any scene may any character name the temperament or occupation of themselves or anyone else. The temperaments or occupations must be revealed to the audience by means of the actions and attitudes of the performers.*⁷

Miles-Brown gives 52 suggestions for type characters. The list includes occupational categories (Detective, Traffic Warden, Inventor, Doctor), broad personality types (Very Shy Person, Liar, Snob), and one-trait types (Non-Stop Talker, Fanatical Gardener, Copy-Cat). It may be worth mentioning that it also includes Neurotic Person, Agitator, Foreigner and Spy.

4

Category meaning is deeply diacritical. A shy person is so only by contrast with non-shy persons within a particular cultural system. (In a different culture, the shy person's behaviour might get him categorised as rather forward.)

But the activity of trying to embody a category, or imitate a member of a category, no doubt *feels* positive. The actor tries to be regal, not to be not-not-regal, however conceptually dependent regality is upon its opposite. Perhaps a prototype royal person⁸ can be conjured up by the actor in imagination whom she can imitate in a quasi-iconic way. Or a script itself can be thought of as establishing a fictional person, belonging to various categories but 'individualised', self-standing like a Henry VIII, whom the actor then aims to embody much as a drawing might. (What is the difference between looking and behaving like Henry VIII and looking and behaving like Sherlock Holmes? And is the actor's work on playing a new but already written character wholly unlike either task?)

The 'rounded character' can be thought of often as having a category-meaning core which is then clothed in the sort of particularity that an individual would have, that an iconic 'portrait' (a moving, speaking portrait) would imitate. This amounts to a flight from the diacritical implications of category meaning via the iconic. (Sugar is more than the diacritically specifiable embodiment of dumb-blonde-singer in *Some Like It Hot*, just as a portrait of someone who actually was blonde, a singer, warm-hearted and gullible would catch *more than that* too.) An equally important flight from the diacritical vortex is via the indexical. Suppose

⁷ John Miles-Brown, *op cit*, p 62.

⁸ The psychologist who has most illuminated the distinction between definitions (whereby a turkey is as much a bird as a sparrow) and prototypes (whereby a sparrow is felt to be a much 'birdier' bird, a much more typical bird, than a turkey) is Eleanor Rosch. See, for example, E Rosch et al, 'Basic Objects in Natural Categories', *Cognitive Psychology*, vol 8, 1976, pp 382-439.



⁹ There is an interesting discussion of early documents in this tradition in Richard deCordova, 'The Emergence of the Star System in America', *Wide Angle*, vol 6 no 4, 1985, pp 4-13, who quotes from a 1916 article in *The Motion Picture Classic* which concluded 'Is your *REEL* hero ever a *REAL* hero?' DeCordova sees the emerging figure of the 'star' at that point as 'characterized by a fairly thoroughgoing articulation of the paradigm professional life/private life' (p 11).

you *were* regal; would just being yourself lend a positive regality to your Henry VIII performance? The endless publicising of coincidences between actors and their roles exploits the fascination of the possibility that one could have fiction and indexicality at the same time through fictional character and real actor happening to share category membership.⁹

It would be worth exploring how much of Stanislavskian theory can be understood as involving the deliberate cultivation of techniques for achieving category coincidence. To play an angry person, remember your own anger: this is a technique for systematising and maximising the degree to which an audience can be guaranteed indexical access to 'real' emotions within the fictional framework. But then the actor needs a further technique for ensuring that emotional memory is always on tap when needed. *Sustaining* the performance – over three hours, over a run in the theatre, over weeks of filming – starts to look like a central professional problem.

In speaking of fleeing the diacritical, I don't mean to imply that the

indexical and iconic aspects of performance are *only* escape routes, or that they are illusory. There is no point trying to establish some kind of imperialism of difference, so to speak, in this area. But the conceptual relationships underlying the indexical and the iconic (contiguity and resemblance respectively) do seem more reassuring than difference, so that the diacritical aspect of categorisation is always what most risks being submerged or denied in folk theories (including, Jacques Derrida would argue, those baroque elaborations of the folk theory of experience which constitute the Western philosophical tradition). And the folk theory of acting is no exception.

5

Of course, discussions of filmic meaning which start out from the indexical, be they folk or Bazinian, themselves generate paradoxes and enigmas quickly enough.

In a fiction film, the indexical aspect of the semiosis necessarily puts before us actors rather than their roles. For an indexical image of Abraham Lincoln we need a nineteenth-century photograph, not an iconic embodiment of the great man, however successful, by Henry Fonda. Yet, as Fonda images, all Henry Fonda roles are equally successful. So, indexically, the actor can never *succeed* in a portrayal, while equally the actor can never *fail* as a pro-filmic object.

The latter consideration is less starkly experienced by us than it might be because of a surreptitious importation of category meaning whereby it is *ideas* about the actor himself or herself – rather than, or at least as well as, the actor simply as living and breathing person – that become important. We gaze, thanks to the mechanical apparatus, at the positivity that is such-and-such a particular person; but that positivity is, in the case of ‘known’ actors, experienced as a person *under a particular description* (category).

A good example of an analysis dependent upon the category infected mode of indexicality – and legitimately so – is Maria La Place’s recent reading of the Bette Davis role in *Now Voyager*.¹⁰ La Place argues that the officially renunciatory ending of the film for its central character, Charlotte, was opened up for spectators in 1942 and later by their knowledge about the real Bette Davis, especially about her 1936 lawsuit with Warner Brothers over her attempt to challenge the exclusive contract system. La Place suggests that, while in *Now Voyager*’s diegesis ‘the really radical act, the representation of Charlotte in the world, in the public sphere of professions does not occur’, nonetheless ‘women spectators knowing the “truth” about Bette Davis can take up the suggestions that are offered by the narrative and make substitutions in their own mental representation of the film. We all know that Bette Davis has a real career which she valorizes above all else.’¹¹

I’m sure this is right (and a good example of the advantages of not confining textual analysis to ‘the text itself’, in case anyone still thinks that

¹⁰ Maria La Place, ‘Bette Davis and the Ideal of Consumption’, *Wide Angle*, vol 6 no 4, 1985, pp 34-43.

¹¹ *ibid*, p 43.



Bette Davis as
Charlotte Vail in *Now
Voyager*.

¹² N.B. Linda Lovelace: an idea of her as a happy libertine is withdrawn in her autobiography in favour of an idea of her as the dominated pawn of an unpleasant husband. The indexical aspect of her films must shift accordingly: the same living-and-breathing person is caught by the camera, but that person must now be seen as really victimised.

desirable or methodologically required); but the spectator alert to the indexical presence on the screen of the Davis whom La Place evokes would be responding to an *idea* of Davis. La Place's own quotes around 'truth' make this clear, as well as her emphasis, on the basis of Charles Higham's biography, on Davis's exceptional control over her publicity material.

The idea of Davis as career woman and proud of it is no doubt a true idea; but it is not 'present' in the same way as the Davis body's presence-to-the-camera is. Imagine the possibility of fraud: in place of Bette Davis the studio creates an image of someone career minded, autonomous, speaking and acting for herself—but actually under the control of some secretive Svengali like figure.¹²

One doesn't want to draw the wrong moral from this. There is no need to be led into the sterile domain of generalised epistemological doubt. Fraud can be registered as a remote possibility while, until the question is *actually* raised, we remain sure that Davis's autonomy and resourceful-

ness were just about as great as 'we all know'. Then, indexically, we *really are* seeing an autonomous, resourceful presence on screen when we watch a Davis film.

But *they*, some other audience, might not – whether they happen not to know anything about Bette Davis, or, more interestingly, are operating with a category structure within which a different description, held diacritically in place otherwise (different differences) applies.

6

Isn't there however a further reason for saying that we really are watching an autonomous, resourceful person – namely, that Bette Davis was *intending to be* such a person, that her aims in this regard in fact operated in terms of a particular categorical structure?

One can challenge that structure – but from the outside. Compare the conceptual world shared by Davis and the wide movie-going public, within which acting *per se* is not immoral, with a conceptual world within which all impersonation is wicked. (Such a world is well attested to in anti-stage literature from the late sixteenth century on.) If you operate within the anti-impersonation framework, and, unluckily, happen to see Davis in a role, you will presumably see her *as* a wicked person. But you would have to admit that she was not, within her own conceptual framework, *aiming to be* a wicked person through playing the role. Whereas if you were to see someone whom you knew to share the anti-impersonation framework nevertheless functioning as an actor, you could speak of wickedness not just as something that person had unwittingly achieved but as her perverse aim (assuming her choice was not made under duress).

This consideration has some pedagogic importance. As performances recede in time, not only are young viewers going to encounter them without knowing biographical details about the performers, but certain categories of the being aimed at will require elucidation too. Nobody has any problems about recognising the mildly beneficial effects of telling students enough about the Hollywood system of the '30s and Davis's rebellion against it to enrich their viewing of *Now Voyager* along the lines La Place suggests. But if we have lost a category that a performer was aiming at, but have lost it for what we are convinced are good reasons (say, the virginal-innocent-martyr aspect of many Gish performances), isn't it reactionary to try to put students in a position to grasp the performance's aims? The answer is no, because we can and should *both* recognise certain categorical systems as not only other but as negatively other, *and* be able to reconstruct the aims of a performance or indeed the aims of an actor's life in those categorical terms – if only to become even more sure that the system as a whole deserves attack rather than revival. To understand all (via reconstructing another framework)¹³ does not commit us to forgiving all (forgiving the framework).

¹³ Important sources of evidence about such other frameworks include not only contemporary reviews, star personality profiles, and other descriptions of performers and performances, but also actors' autobiographies (an unduly despised body of writing) and manuals on how to succeed as an actor in the film and television world.

Any talk about aiming or intending, of course, was scrupulously kept out of my earlier article, which was written at a point when rejecting intention-based accounts of screen meanings was still a reflex move. It is clearer now that the answer to simplistic and romantic intentionalist accounts cannot in the long run be accounts which cannot recognise that people frequently plan things which sometimes, partially or even wholly, actually happen.

The earlier article presented the diacritical stratum of screen meaning

Commutation: the awards scene in *A Star Is Born*, as performed by James Mason in 1954 (above) and Kris Kristofferson in 1976.



as something that happens to the actor behind her back, which she can't do much about. The open-endedness of the potentially relevant set of contrasting performances has this effect. The James Mason/Kris Kristofferson distinction as displayed in the 1954 and 1976 versions of *A Star Is Born* is hardly something that Mason can have been working at! And whether or not Kristofferson (or director Frank Pierson, or whoever) did think about the distinction in fashioning his performance is a question which could in principle be answered (a lot, a little, not at all) without the answer affecting the force of the differentiation as experienced by someone able to compare the two versions.

Once we allow ourselves to think about performance in a way which might connect with the experience of someone actually trying to perform, such a perspective begins to look distinctly limiting. The diacritical stratum is not wholly a behind-the-back affair. With the indexical and the iconic strata also given their due, a description of screen acting more realistically balanced between what the actor intends and what the actor unwittingly achieves can be offered.

The iconic is the area within which an intentional vocabulary seems most appropriate. Olivier doing a television *King Lear* is aiming at a depiction of Lear; he achieves, as a by-product, not-being-Michael-Hordern-as-Lear, but he will surely experience that, if at all, as an epiphenomenon of the performance. Forming a notion of the role you are charged with playing, and then succeeding or failing to achieve an adequate embodiment of that notion, is how one powerful model of acting in our culture defines the actor's method of proceeding. (Note that the notion of the role can itself be judged a success or a failure against some further view of what the author intended or what the text 'says': what possibilities for complicated condemnations the audience is allowed! More on this below.) The limits of intentionality even on this view remain important; Actor X sometimes simply *cannot* play role Y (Olivier in 1985, unlike Olivier in 1922¹⁴, cannot play Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*).

The actor's indexical force might seem something that cannot be aimed at because it is always there (see section 5 above). But if the actor's own being is a result of a triumph of the will, is that being as picked up by the camera not *intended* just as much as a role-portrayal is? Certainly the biographies and autobiographies of performers in our culture frequently talk in these terms (or, in deploring the opposite case – the actor not in control of herself and her own destiny – presuppose the positive case as the norm). Equally frequently, an indexical force that cannot be worked for, that is just given, is spoken of: 'she was just somebody the camera loved'. Probably it is true both that our current folk theory of acting is deeply inconsistent in this area and that different performers, or even whole performance traditions, genuinely fit a more intention based model rather than a less, or vice versa.

Even diacritical distinctions can be aimed for, as the first of the Miles-Brown exercises quoted above makes clear. Actors as well as others engaged in the filmic collaboration may be quite deliberate in their

¹⁴ Laurence Olivier,
*Confessions of an
Actor*,
Harmondsworth,
Penguin, 1984, p 29.

efforts to achieve sufficient differentiation between one character and another within a film, or between a character in one film and earlier characters in comparison with whom a novelty effect is wanted. As usual, to test for the existence of an intention based model in the field, ask whether audiences are accustomed to judging results in the field as failures or successes. If practitioners know that they may be judged to fail, it surely follows that they must aim to succeed. And *insufficient difference*, in various senses, can easily be demonstrated to be a standard criticism levelled against performers.

All this needs much more detailed investigation, both conceptually and empirically. I'd hope that this work could be related to the consideration of what effective political intentionality here and now may involve. Certainly no movement for which the question 'What is to be done?' remains evergreen can remain content for long with an aesthetic theory in which that question is taken to have been abolished, if only because the aesthetic's autonomy from the political would thereby backhandedly have been achieved.

8

Along with its avoidance of intention questions, the earlier essay also steered clear of evaluation questions. This too contributed to its unreality from the point of view of the practitioner.

Whether we like it or not, the difference that the professional actor is actually most working at is the difference between success and failure. Normative considerations are absolutely basic to the cinema, as to the theatre, as an institution. One of the things the audience pays for is the right to judge. The glee we take in disliking or despising performances is, when you think about it, striking; we do not want to look as if we can be easily pleased. This is not a particularly attractive side of social life,¹⁵ and the dream of a non-normative, descriptive-analytical discourse on the cinema arises not only out of the desire for truth but from a wish to escape the tedium and the frivolity of the judgmental. However, it turns out that such a discourse cannot just turn its back on normative practices, because to describe performance *x* is to describe the result of someone operating in a particular conceptual minefield. Indeed, the full particularity of the minefield is often what needs reconstructing: learning the 'language' of silent film performance, for instance, is in part a matter of working out what can have been *wanted*, and why, given that something has happened over time to make the results unendurable (or at best enjoyable as 'quaint') to a non-specialist audience today.

Performance norms present as clear a case of cultural relativity as could be asked for. Not only the experience of non-Western performance traditions, not only the accessibility of sufficiently detailed descriptions of acting in our own culture in previous centuries, but even the short history of the sound cinema illustrates how one framework's good is another's alien, stiff, laughable. From this fact, however, it is easy to

¹⁵ A usefully sardonic account of this can be found in Rom Harré, *Social Being: A Theory for Social Psychology*, Oxford, Rowman, 1980; see especially pp 22-26.

draw the wrong conclusion. Because customs differ, it does not follow that they are somehow unreal or non-binding in their own time and space.¹⁶ Because a particular view of 'good acting' is a (minor) part of a non-optimal society's armoury, it does not follow that challenging that view is necessarily a radical act, or that failure to challenge that view necessarily disqualifies a performance from having radical effects. In other words, conventionally bad acting may be, in a given situation, *just* bad rather than 'Brechtian', and a naturalistic performance which 'convinces' according to currently dominant codes of the convincing can be integral to a piece of film or video with effective subversive power.

Alongside the folk or consumer theory of good acting, a specialising culture like our own will see the development of a practitioner's theory. How is the professional actor to learn to avoid censure and gain praise consistently? What techniques can be acquired that will achieve what the audience expects – or for that matter achieve a challenge to expectations that is effective rather than null? Where the folk theory of acting registers relatively unanalysed disquiet by means of adjectives such as 'wooden', the practitioner theory tries to diagnose in an explanatory way which can lead to improvement. 'Tension in a performer can be transmitted to other members of the cast, in fact to the audience itself, although not many members of the audience would be able to pinpoint why that particular performer gives them a sense of unease.'¹⁷ A technical explanation of the fault can however be given:

Tension usually shows itself first in the voice, because the breathing is often shallow and the muscles of the larynx are tensed as for the production of a range of higher notes. Further, there is little resonance, as the resonating cavities of the pharynx and chest are muscularly restricted and the oral cavity is not open enough to add resonance and give projection.

The remedy: relaxation exercises, and beyond that a more generalised relaxation self-discipline. ('There are, of course, pastimes which can put us mentally and physically at ease, such as taking a warm bath, going for a walk by the sea, having a drink with friends, swimming or dancing and, very effectively, being in any situation that makes us laugh.'¹⁸) No amount of inveighing against the Stanislavskian tradition which shirks confronting how that tradition contributes to training at this level of detail, and acknowledging that success or failure really may ensue from the practices it aims to put the actor in control of, will ultimately be very effective in the development of alternative (less hot-bath?) performance practices.

9

To sum up: over and above the earlier article's failure to place the diacritical aspect of screen acting in any relation to other aspects, it suffered from not making the point of the exercise, beyond its conceptual inter-

¹⁶ On this, see Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley, *Social Relations and Human Attributes*, London, Methuen, 1982, pp 107-117.

¹⁷ John Miles-Brown, *op cit*, pp 15-16.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p 16.

est, at all clear. What do you *do differently* as the result of illuminations from a semiotics of acting? The essay did conclude with a quasi-political justification of the enterprise in terms of ideological critique, of 'promoting the right sort of suspicion'. I am now more suspicious of suspicion, at least of the media studies curriculum suspicion, the tricks of which currently threaten to become monotonously standard (admittedly only in its own ghettoised 'patch'), than I was then. However, it no doubt remains true, given that commutation affords access to the repertoire of distinctions current in a given society, that some of these are necessary objects of critique, whether via relatively subtle discoveries in the field of discrimination (taking that word in a negative sense) or via novel confirmation of the banal but still massively oppressive major discriminations suffered by people on the basis of sex, race and class.

But beyond this, it would clearly be a good thing if a screen acting semiotics could make some contribution to practice. Sustained thought about intention and judgment will, however, be necessary if that is to take place. Currently, work in the independent production sector has not generally followed Peter Gidal's heroic proposal that any representation of the human figure at all will be so steeped in ideology that it should be avoided within progressive film practice (result: films about rooms). But in retaining while problematising human figures, narratives in which they figure, and a 'dramatic cinema' generally, independent film-makers have not always found it easy to talk to those other practitioners whose skill takes specific forms in our culture which need to be taken seriously. Have the actors been cattle any less in counter-cinema than in Hitchcock? Rather too often otherwise interesting initiatives have embedded in themselves a certain sort of drained, sub-Godardian, would-be Brechtian, pompous zombie performance which represents a wasted opportunity in the exploration of viable alternative cinematic or televisual forms. This does not have to happen.



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APPROACHES TO 'PERFORMANCE'

AN ANALYSIS OF TERMS BY GRAHAME F THOMPSON

¹ For example, Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1975 and Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980.

² Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1972, p 105.

THE FORMAL ANALYSIS of textual practices is now well advanced.¹ This article examines the specific role played by 'performance' in terms of such practices. The point of entry is a basic dissatisfaction with the way 'performance' appears both in casual discussion and with respect to much 'structural' analysis. The formal analysis of textual codes is all very well, but when these codes and their structure have been disentangled in various ways, we tend to be left with an unsatisfactory residue – the 'performance code', one might say. In fact this is the site of a preliminary terminological issue. Peter Wollen, for example, has suggested that while texts are coded in terms of durable messages and instructions, the performance of these is not coded but 'graded'.² Such a graded activity is made up of facilitative variants. It is a process by which the text is emancipated, struggling free from the confines imposed by the score or screenplay in a 'stylistic' execution of expressiveness. As we shall see, such a mechanism is but one variant of a rather larger class of approaches to performance, but it still leaves unanalysed the characteristics of performance as such. It is towards the analysis of this unanalysed element in textual processes that this article is addressed.

In very general terms we can say that 'performance' is the mode of assessment of the 'textual/character/actor' interaction. Performance is interestingly placed at the intersection of the text, the actor/character and the audience. Or so it seems at first glance. The aim of the analysis undertaken below is to specify this juxtapositioning more clearly and to explore some of its implications. In fact there are various different ways in which 'performance' has been approached in the literature and the next section reviews these in summary form before going on to explore in more detail the problems they raise.

Performance: a Preliminary Specification

While in this section a number of different approaches are specified in outline form, these are not meant to imply completely discrete and

mutually exclusive alternatives. By and large these approaches are linked, in one sense quite closely as I shall argue below. They are separated here for analytical convenience rather than out of any radical theoretical necessity.

A) The first approach concerns the tying of performance closely to representation. Performance is centrally implicated with a process of representation and signification, and particularly with the former element of this couple. To cite Stephen Heath discussing cinematic performance:

*Cinema is founded on the memory of reality, the spectacle of reality captured and presented. All presentation, however, is representation – a production, a construction of positions and effects – and all representation is performance – the time of that production and construction, of the realization of the positions and effects.*³

Here performance is the time of the production and construction of the positions and effects resulting from the representation and memory recognitions embodied in the filmic process. Heath is very much concerned with the 'performance of time' in this article. He analyses films in terms of the ways in which various times are articulated within them. The theoretical underpinning of these notions will be drawn out below where I return to Heath's more general position.

B) The second approach concerns performance as an 'excess', a 'supplement', or an 'event' in relation to the structure/text. This is typical of a number of what are termed 'post-structuralist' writers⁴ but also of Barthes and Derrida. There are therefore again a number of variants on this approach, but these are unified to a large extent by what might be termed their overtly 'phenomenological' character. Without wishing to do an injustice to these writers I would suggest that the general form of their approach is as follows: the text produces an 'outline' of meaning and sense, something that can be 'culturally' recognised. With respect to this the role of performance is to 'fill in' this outline or *supplement* it. This process gives the text its necessary and satisfactory richness. The issue becomes how this 'filling in' of the outline is to be theoretically analysed. In the case of Barthes it is actually the 'spilling-out' over the outline that is the particular form of the problem. These issues will be taken up below.

C) The third approach involves allying performance very closely to acting. This is the main way in which performance has been discussed in such British journals as *Screen* recently and in British Film Institute monographs.⁵ Here performance is predominately analysed in terms of the 'creation' or 'construction' and presentation of character and characters, where such characters are the constructed representations of persons. This approach is thus closely linked to the first two discussed in that it is concerned with representations – or with the performance 'signs' as this is termed – and with character as that which acts out ('fills out') the text for an audience. This process is analysed through such

³ Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, London, Macmillan, 1981, p 115.

⁴ For example, Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach' and Stanley Fisher 'Literature in the Reader: An Effective Stylistics', in Jane P Tompkins (ed), *Reader – Response Criticism*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1980. These and other authors in this tradition are grouped around the American journal *New Literary History*.

⁵ John O Thompson, 'Screen Acting and the Commutation Test', *Screen*, Summer 1978, volume 19 no 2, pp 55-69; Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London, British Film Institute, 1979; and Tony Stephens, 'Signs of Life: Acting and Presentation', *Screen Education* 36, Autumn 1980, pp 85-97.

⁶ This aspect of Goffman's work is endemic in his writings up to the early '80s (and beyond, some would suggest). See, for instance, Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971.

⁷ Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1981.

categories as 'identification', the 'imagination' and so on.

D) The final approach to be considered in this section concerns performance as 'role playing'. This is the most overtly sociological variant of the approaches and is closely associated with the work of Erving Goffman. Here performance is enacted through 'interaction' rituals'. This approach raises the issue of performance as not simply associated with 'textual practices' of some kind (in the strong sense of this term) but also with *ritualistic practices*. For this reason, if nothing else, this approach is important – it opens up the possibility of the analysis of rituals in relation to performance. Exactly how one conceptualises these 'rituals' (and even whether the term itself is useful) will be discussed towards the conclusion of this article. What Goffman does, however, is to offer a different level of intelligibility with respect to the analysis of performance. However, this is complicated by the fact that his work is not homogeneous: there are at least two sides to Goffman's position, one of which offers a productive stance while the other, for various reasons outlined below, needs to be displaced. I hope to demonstrate on what grounds his work can be used in pursuit of a non-essentialist and non-universalistic approach to performance. At this stage, though, it will be useful to sketch in the main features and consequences of the 'two sides' as I see them.

The 'Young' Goffman: This is the Goffman of the 'all life is a stage on which we are all players' approach.⁶ Here we are *all always* acting out some 'pre-defined' roles in some sense. We are always performing against some *norm* in our social interactions (whether this norm be one of 'success' or more often for Goffman of 'failure'). Thus this involves a very expanded notion of performance which invades everything we do. In this sense the approach is too widely drawn to be very useful. Secondly, it involves a clear notion of the sociologically formed and fully conscious subject who then acts or performs on the 'stage of life'. Such an individual is largely predefined in his or her consciousness 'somewhere else' or 'before' they enter onto this stage of life. For reasons which cannot be developed in this paper such a conception of the individual as 'performing marionette' implied by this approach is not a useful one.

The 'Older' Goffman: This is the Goffman of *Forms of Talk*⁷, where it could be argued a lot of the baggage of the previous approach is jettisoned or has little effect. The papers collected in this book are more interested in examining the ritualistic limits of certain small-scale forms of cultural activity, such as lecturing and radio talks. The point of this is to put 'meaning' into a 'context' which limits its possible incoherence. The analogy can be developed with the seeming superfluity of meaning that modern textual analysis quite reasonably discerns from the non-closure of textual forms. 'Sense' then is always threatened in an 'overspill' that might flood or sweep away coherence. Such a threat engenders desperate attempts at prevention, to struggle against it and to channel meaning into 'appropriate' (culturally defined) directions. Any specific 'performance ritual' associated with an appropriate frame could then be

¹³ Stephen Heath, *op cit*, p 118.

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London, New Left Books, 1971.

rests upon recognising a distinction between the subject of the enounced and the subject of the enunciation, that is, between the subject *in* the proposition or statement and the subject *of* the proposition or statement. These are not reducible to each other, which leads to the splitting of the subject in language and to the 'appearance', largely as a result, of a multiplicity of egos. The subject is not then the 'beginning' in the form of an ontological 'whole', but is always already a structure of difference, the result of which indexes a 'lack'. This lack in the symbolic inscribes a desire in the imaginary for a wholeness. Here is determined the constant drama of the subject in language—the effort to construct an imaginary whole subject. The construction of this identity of the subject is a movement of exchange, a ceaseless attempt to balance the subject of the enounced and the subject of the enunciation, between the symbolic and the imaginary. 'Thus there is a permanent performance of the subject in language itself—permanent and interminable—in an attempt to complete the incompletable production of identity and cohesion, to provide fictions and images, to make sense.'¹³

This process is exploited in narrative cinema, Heath argues, by an *apparatus of identification* which is organised around a 'menu of looks' that in one way or another provide the point of view identifications and positions for audience and characters. This apparatus continually positions and re-positions the subject, via representation. It constitutes a ceaseless performance of the 'subject' via the performance of time in the film and the performance of a remembering—the production and re-production of a memory. This remembering takes place again and again in a constant return—an economy of repetition.

In this way 'fiction' is not opposed to 'reality'. Subjectivity is constructed as a reality by fiction continuously working over that reality. Identifications are produced in the imaginary. The imaginary is the category of identifications and the ego is the location of the subject's identifications. But by means of a restriction on the deployment of the terrain of the imaginary, provided by setting a series of signs in a chain or process, *characterisation* is produced.

According to Cixous, this process 'sociologises' the subject by inserting it into the social machine of culturally recognisable signs. So in this sense a character is always in store for the subject along the chain where everything is coded in advance. This conceptualisation of performance and character excludes in advance the infinite potential of the subject to *rise up*. In a way it represses 'subjectivity' by a sort of 'cancelling out' of the unconscious, and pushes 'character' back into a pure representation-alism. The 'personage' of the character thereby functions as a recognisable social sign and assures a communicability through identifications.

This concept, in turn, organises 'recognitions'. It can thus easily link up to the idea of ideology conceived as a system of recognitions/misrecognitions whereby the character becomes that 'whole subject' whose plenitude allows the exclamation 'Who? Me?' Performance becomes part of the 'hailing' mechanism of Althusser's interpellated subject.¹⁴ The text can then become subordinated under a subject's 'truth', 'life' or

'biography'. The 'I' becomes that 'fabulous opera' in which the portrait, mask, distinguishing features, etc, that serve to differentiate one person from another, are inscribed.

As Heath remarks, the crucial notion in this process of the inscription of the subject in the filmic system is that of identification. To show how character is drawn into this thematic space more systematically he develops a hierarchy of attribution from the most general to the most particular of levels in which the 'body' figures as representation in film, and which organises the terms of its performance.¹⁵ These levels are respectively agent, character, person and image, which are articulated into a performance by the term 'figure'.

*If the image is a moment of fiction, of coherence, the figure is a point of dispersion, a kind of 'disarticulation', the end of the image under the pressure of the other.*¹⁶

The figure, Heath suggests, is a shifting circulation between these levels, which secures the position of the subject within the multiplicity of its potential identifications. There is, of course, a 'radical' critique of this mechanism in both Heath and Cixous and I return to this below under the guise of a discussion of Derrida's critique of representational theatre.

One of the other ways in which the subject is inscribed within the performance of the text is via the idea of performance as 'excess' referred to above. Following a distinction introduced by Kristeva, Barthes' essay 'The Grain of the Voice'¹⁷ draws a relevant distinction between the *phono-song* and the *geno-song*. With the phono-song everything in the performance is understood. It serves pleasurable communication, involving clear *representation*, clear *expression*, clear *interpretation*, etc. In fact everything understood as acknowledged cultural values is brought to bear on the song and works there. The geno-song, on the other hand, *exceeds* culture. It works through the *body* and not through the *soul*. It forms a signifiatory play which has little to do with communication, the representation of feelings, expression of moods, etc. It is concerned with pure diction, with the sway of *jouissance*. It produces a loss of the subject. This kind of performance works along *signifiante*. This is a process whereby the subject of the text continually escapes it, escapes 'the tyranny of meaning' to engage with other logics. It also escapes the definition of itself as a knowing subject.

Notice, however, that this theory of performance does not do away with the notion of subjectivity. While it does not place the subject in the text as a strict projection or an interpellation, the subject is placed just the same, this time in the form of an absence or 'loss'. Here, however, performance works *against* the full implications of the text.

We can now move on to a discussion of the overt phenomenological variant of the 'exchange of looks between text and audience' approach to performance.¹⁸ With this particular variant the reader or audience is actively brought in via a notion of 'human agency' to complete the 'text'. It is his or her look, constructed through a concept of an 'imaginative

¹⁵ Most notably in Stephen Heath, 'Film and System, Terms of Analysis, Part II', *Screen* Summer 1975, vol 16 no 2, 1975, p 100 and in 'Body, Voice', Chapter 8 of Heath, *op cit*.

¹⁶ Stephen Heath, 'Film and System ...', *op cit*, p 105.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, *op cit*. Another approach which employs a notion of 'excess' to analyse performance is suggested by Jean-Louis Commolli, 'Historical Fiction: a Body Too Much', *Screen*, Summer 1978, vol 19 no 2, pp 41-53.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *op cit*.

¹⁹ An analogous, if somewhat different, approach to this is provided by Richard Courtney, 'A Dramatic Theory of Imagination', *New Literary History*, Spring 1971, vol 2 no 3, pp 445-460.

²⁰ In particular, John O Thompson, op cit and Richard Dyer, op cit. See also John O Thompson's critique of his earlier position in this issue.

²¹ John Ellis, op cit, Chapter 6, 'Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon'.

²² The 'photo-effect' is taken from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida - Reflections on Photography*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1980. It refers to a regime of presence - yet absence - embodied in all photographic images.

²³ John Ellis, op cit, p 93.

experience' which completes the text/subject interaction by permitting the performance to work. What the text does is to provide an 'outline', a fixed and definable picture, but one with certain gaps in it. These gaps arise because of the necessary partiality of any text with respect to the action of its reading. There is a moment of realisation of the text which is of necessity separated from it in the act of its consumption or reading. With respect to this gap the text itself sets up processes of anticipation and retrospection which are interwoven via the imagination of the reader/spectator. The text is virtual, and its experience is felt as a 'desire to picture' through an imaginative experience. This is a process of *gestalt* whereby illusion takes over. The indeterminacy of the text is filled by an illusory, but readable *gestalt*, which in setting up a process of the formation and shattering of illusions, allows the performance (action) of the text to take place. And this action is one that the reader/reviewer performs on the text or in relation to the text. It secures a kind of richer or fuller subjectivity by 'supplementing' the text with a subjectively imaginative performance.¹⁹

Those theories of acting which connect with performance tend to employ the conceptual apparatus discussed above. Their particular concern is with the notion and role of actor in relation to the 'text/performance/character/subjectivity' relationship. Acting is seen as a *means* of signification, the means by which the performance works to permit the structure/text to connect with the subject and produce identifications. The importation from semiotics of the 'commutation test' examines the effects of hypothetically exchanging one actor or actress for another, one set of features and characteristics with another set, one set of 'looks' for another. In this way the features specific to a performance as such can be isolated and enumerated as so many units of difference.²⁰

Thompson and Dyer are particularly interested in the category of 'stars' in this approach to acting and it is in connection to the performance and character of stars that the peculiarly British appropriation of the theory of 'identification' and 'imagination' has been developed. The exemplary instance of this is to be found in John Ellis's book *Visible Fictions*.²¹ Performance here completes the image of the star that exists in subsidiary circulation. But this completion is at most ambiguous and incoherent because it is a *promise* only. This is because it rests upon the paradoxical nature of the 'photo-effect' which works via the mechanism of making an absence present.²²

*In this sense, the star image is not completed by the film performance because they both rest upon the same paradox. Instead, the star image promises cinema. It restates the terms of the photo effect, renews the desire to experience this very particular sense of present absence. So the star image is incomplete and paradoxical. It has a double relationship to the film performance: it proposes that the film performance will be more complete than the star image; and it echoes and promotes the photo effect which is fundamental to cinema as a regime of representation.*²³

This basic point is embellished with most of the other aspects of performance and text as noted above. The film performance is a 'special event' (p98), it can 'expand the realm of desire' (p101); 'the fiction exceeds the circulated image' (p102 and p103); stars 'offer a *supplementary* signification' (p105), etc.²⁴ Once again then the paraphernalia of representation, identification and the imagination are all set to work in an attempt to complete the basic phenomenological project.

²⁴ Italics added by
Grahame Thompson.

²⁵ David Silverman,
Reading Castaneda,
London, Routledge
and Kegan Paul,
1975.

Text, Context and Performance

While dealing with these phenomenological approaches to performance it will be worth pressing further to look at an example of an approach which does not so much stress the *text* and performance but rather the *context* and performance. There is a tendency with this approach to reduce any performance of a text, or any 'reading' of a text, to the dictates of a context. This context is the 'common community of a shared mode of existence' to use a phrase so aptly coined by David Silverman in *Reading Castaneda*.²⁵ Here Silverman argues that texts conceal that which makes the saying of them possible, or what makes the performance of them possible. What secures the link between 'social individuals', or between author and audience, is the link of them both being members of a common community. Performance is to make sense of something, he argues, and to perform or read is to remember again our shared mode of existence. In reading what an author says we 'forget' that we are producing the sense ourselves. We both write and are written in terms of this context. Despite some differences, it is by no mere quirk or theoretical aberration that Silverman can use Barthes in his final chapter where these points are made clear. These are particular variants of a more general approach, one in which performance fulfils the same function of permitting the inscription of a subject into the structural/textual operation. What permits this recognition of subjectivity for Silverman are the shared codes in which individual authors and audiences/ readers exist.

What Silverman's book does do, or rather what it can be used to do, is to enable us once again to raise the issue of Goffman's approach. The latter's position demonstrates many of the features of Silverman's 'shared or common mode of existence' analysis. Social identity and appropriate behavioural norms can be paraded as the context for role playing or interaction rituals to work (or even to be frustrated, as is Goffman's premise on a number of counts). In Silverman's approach, though, a rather shadowy community tends to be invoked rather than argued for or explained, whereas with Goffman a much clearer, if still unsatisfactory, picture emerges on this score.

While the various approaches discussed in detail here may seem somewhat different in character, they share a fundamental and common structure. They tend to analyse performance in terms of the way *it* 'permits', 'enables', or 'encourages' the constitution of *the* subject in relationship

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, Chapter 8

²⁷ Perhaps Derrida is too harsh on Brecht in his critique. Brecht's project was not *just* to shift the 'place' of the constitution of the object, it was also to change the nature of that object – to replace a comfortable recognition by a radical knowledge, though this was obviously tied into a political project as well.

²⁸ At this point, Derrida's critique coincides with that of Heath and Cixous. They too want to unhinge repetition and easy identification via a disruption of the representational mechanism.

to *the* textual structure and thereby links in *the* audience/reader in various ways to this process. What sustains this general procedure is just this essentialist notion. The exchange of looks between reader and character is a *universal* permitting the 'performance' of the structure/textual formation of the subject.

Now it could be argued that it is this very universalism and essentialism that avoids an analysis of the specific historical and social constituents of performance and character, where these are not simply deducible from or reducible to a 'context'. As an aside here we can point to a tendency to pay lip service to historical specificity by invoking the use of a concept of 'context'. Instead of providing an analysis of how historical specificities are constituted and work, they are reduced to effects of the context in which they operate.

Returning to the point at hand, one way of trying to unhinge this universalism a little is to look closely at one of the most trenchant critiques of the couple 'representation/subjectivity'. For this purpose I employ Jacques Derrida's essay 'The Theatre of Cruelty' which attacks representational theatre.²⁶ In this, following Artaud, Derrida calls for the affirmation of a different form of theatre – what is termed the theatre of cruelty. This is not a representational theatre, nor is it a Brechtian theatre of 'romantic negativity'. It is a theatre that breaks a belonging, not one that affirms a different belonging. Derrida argues that the Brechtian theatre wants to shift the constitution of the spectacle on to the audience so that it can provide itself with its own object. This object, rather crudely put, is political mobilisation and Derrida's point is that political theatre or cultural activity is not necessarily always (or even predominantly) involved with questions of mobilisation.²⁷

Derrida is adamant that the theatre of cruelty is not a representation – it is about 'life itself'. It is a *spectacle* in which the *stage* is reconstructed against the text. Such a theatre relegates speech to a very secondary position. It foregrounds the 'space' of the stage against the 'time' of speech and performance. There is no display to the spectator (or representation), only a *force* which disrupts language and speech as a logic of representation. It is not a theatre of the unconscious but of the overtly conscious. In turn this implies that there is no longer simply a spectator or spectacle as such, but *festival*. The spectator is 'dissolved' as the spectacle of the stage surrounds him or her. Derrida wishes to destroy 'repetition' in general and hence traditional character since this relies upon repetition for the mechanism of identification.²⁸ This 'festival of cruelty' would take place 'only one time', as it were: it would be an 'event'.

While this is the *project* of such a Derridaean theatre, he recognises that in fact any cultural activity will be a *play* on this. It can only push non-repetition and non-representation to its limit. This is because such a project can only be a manifesto. I think there is a recognition of the difficulty of conceiving of what such a theatre without 'performance' as normally understood would be like 'on the ground', in Derrida's terms. What is theatre or any cultural activity without some conception of the

'means of presentation' of a text, without an action and a representation of some sort?

The problem with these types of account, of which this is only one instance it should be added, is that they are caught in a peculiar space of analysis. Representation is attacked by means of a structure which of itself necessarily involved representation, and hence which re-duplicates it in one way or another. This it does in the form of a slightly embarrassed re-embrace, a sheepish re-recognition of its necessity, however radically it at first tries to deconstruct this. In this way the strengths of these positions cannot be pushed through thoroughly or decisively. What is needed here is to think representation in a new and different way.

Thus Derrida, like the other theorists discussed above, only serves to complete the phenomenological project despite valiant attempts to free himself from it. At one level the arguments deployed against representation and subjectivity are as much caught up in a universalism as are those formulations against which the deconstruction is pitched. But what can be positively picked up from his analysis is the idea of the *mechanism of the stage*. The historical constitution of this metaphor of the stage as a cultural mechanism for display and its reduplication across a number of widely separate and seemingly disconnected provinces would provide a fruitful approach, one to which I return in the final part of this article. But first I want to return to Goffman.

Performance as Ritual?

Goffman's general project is, strictly speaking, also part of a phenomenological sociology: the description of the laws of what is supposed not to have any laws and the analysis of the structures of what is supposed to have freed itself from structure. His interest in ordinary people's 'accounts' of social interaction is less concerned with 'textual forms' as transmitted through speech or writing than with the 'full substantiality of things themselves'. He wants to give statements about these 'objective' structures in themselves. Part of the project involves the substitution of 'socio-cultural frames' for what are normally called customs. Experiences are 'framed' and they relate to, transpose, key into, or cancel out, other frames. It is possible, then, to conceive of these frames as 'semiotic' in character.²⁹ Such a 'socio-semiotic frame' becomes a kind of 'grammar' or quasi-syntactical abstraction for the analysis of social life. It does not rely upon a conscious observing subject to activate it but rather functions as the very organisation of social meaning in the form of a contextualising constraint. In Bourdieu's description, it becomes part of

... the logic of the work of representation; that is to say, the whole set of strategies with which social subjects strive to construct their identity, to shape their social image, in a word to produce a show. He [Goffman] regarded social subjects as actors who put on a performance and who,

²⁹ See, for instance, Frederic Jameson, 'On Goffman's "Frame Analysis"' *Theory and Society*, vol 13 no 1, 1976, pp 119-133. This is also the way Goffman has been read by Pierre Bourdieu in 'Erving Goffman, Discoverer of the Infinitely Small', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol 2 no 1, 1983, pp 112-113.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p 113 (emphasis in the original).

³¹ See Grahame Thompson, 'Carnival and Calculable: Consumption and Play at Blackpool', in *Formations of Pleasure*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, pp 124-137.

³² Ian Hunter 'Reading Character', *Southern Review*, vol 16 no 2, 1983, pp 226-43.

*through a more or less sustained mise en scène, endeavour to show themselves off in the best light.*³⁰

But if the 'socio-economic frame' is conceived as a 'signifying space' in this rather conventional manner, it collapses back into the same set of problems and issues identified in the approaches above. On the other hand if it is preserved as a *ritual*, but as a ritual of transgression – that which is 'beyond' social order, or that which suddenly allows us to grasp just what that social order was in the first place – this seems to provide a more fertile ground. Goffman is perhaps at his strongest and most interesting when dealing with the anxious and shameful features of cultural interaction. Face to face interaction is most revealing not when it is offered fully completed, but when it is unsuccessful, or only partly successful; when the interactions or performances have been short-circuited by misunderstanding, by embarrassments, confusions of 'role', the breaking of frame, etc. Performance then is a 'protective ritual' to prevent embarrassment. When the performance fails the embarrassment ensues. In this way a successful performance almost 'overcomes' the ritual of its enactment. The ritualistic dissolves under these circumstances. It is within terms of this 'playfulness' typified by Goffman's interests, that we can begin to break down and break up the solid terrain of a 'social' and an 'individual' juxtaposition and its universalistic articulation.³¹ This, then, provides one possible avenue for proceeding. Another is provided by taking a different approach towards the question of historical and discursive specificity and to the notion of 'context' that it constructs.

A more fruitful path avoids the terminology of 'ritual' altogether. Ritual conjures up ideas of an 'interminable return', the reproduction and re-duplication of patterns of social interaction, and of symbolic meaning through such social interactions. While this is all very well at one level, it overemphasises the constraint on dynamic change and presents an obstacle to conceiving the developmental aspects of historical transformations. Here we need a different terminology, one perhaps better provided, in terms of the conditions of existence of particular institutionalised practices and mechanisms. Such is the approach recently adopted by Ian Hunter.³²

The spirit of this suggestion is not to look for something which would underlie performance and explain its universal meaning. It is not to ask 'What is performance?' but to identify a set of practical circumstances existing at the same level as performance and forming a kind of 'surface' on which it emerges, not possessing a function or an essence but with a duration and with effects and an intelligibility governed by practical familiarity with those circumstances. In this vein Hunter develops an analysis of 'character' which, he argues, was radically re-conceived and transformed during the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, character was 'read' in a way that classified and judged according to a set of primarily rhetorical rules and norms for the proper construction of a dramatic representation. Within this matrix

of norms and rules it was not the *character* of the performed roles which was at stake but rather their appropriate characterisation. The rules formed a grid of classification and judgement – a grid in which an appropriate performance of modes of speech and action for neo-classical dramatic representation could take place. It was from this grid (uniting time and action for instance) that the text emerged *as an effect*. So characters and performances were not read via a comparison with real personalities but through applying the rules and norms appropriate at the time.

What emerged during the nineteenth century, however, was character and performance read as pertaining to a *moral object*. Here character is a projection or correlate of the reader's or audience's moral self or personality.³³ Performance is then judged as a mechanism giving rise to this new kind of moral enquiry. Character emerges as a new field and as a new object into a space of moral interrogation and training. (Performance 'demonstrates' the moral training.)

Crucial here, Hunter argues, was the simultaneous emergence and deployment of a set of diagnostic and interrogative mechanisms treating madness and involving moral character assessment in a number of 'adjacent domains'. These provided the models, devices, techniques of analysis, etc, to form part of the new surface on which character and its performance appeared and were judged.

This involved a change in the public apparatuses and institutions of such 'readings' of moral character and interrogation rather than in the private consciousness or the reader's 'point of view'. The 'site' of character assessment also changed from the institutions of the academy and the salon to the hospital, the prison, the reformatory and the school. This process also involved the secularisation of church ritual of moral interrogation and confession. These began to be deployed not only through regulatory institutions but with respect to 'self-interrogation' as well. All this penetrated into the apparatuses of moral psychology and literary analysis. The object of these techniques was the production of knowledge and truth via disciplinary individuation. This involved the *strategy* of a disciplinary society (rather, one might add, than the myth of a disciplined one) via the deployment of a range of disciplinary technologies, in Foucault's terms. Foucault offers a way of analysing these non-discursive and discursive practices and mechanisms as *not* directly analogous to linguistic structures and forms, i.e., as not dependent upon a textual apparatus.³⁴

The new analysis of character and performance was one such mechanism involved in the construction of a machinery for the assessment of 'moral selves' or 'good personal characters', and for the presentation of these. Its effectivity was only partially secured via literary analysis but was played off the 'rituals' or mechanisms and practices of a range of diverse and seemingly unconnected institutional settings. It is in this way that a kind of parallel repetition was set up which was organised into a systematic regime of moral training.³⁵

Within this approach performance would become a form of pedagogy, a set of practical and routinised techniques and disciplinary structures

³³ This is not to argue that pre-nineteenth century characters were not addressed in terms of their appropriate 'moral traits'. But here they were universalistically and morally connoted as appropriate 'global' caricatured types, e.g. as 'Death', 'Greed', 'Avarice' and the like in earlier morality plays.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London, Tavistock, 1970 and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London, Tavistock, 1972.

³⁵ This apparatus of moral training is examined by Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol 1, London, Allen Lane, 1979. For a recent discussion of the notion of 'surface', see the contributions by Noel King and Ian Hunter to 'The "Text in Itself"', *Southern Review*, vol 17 no 2, July 1984, pp 125-134. This symposium also raises the problem of 'context' in relation to sociological reductionism.

that make up a technology of training in sociability and the intelligibility of the text; that thereby normalised these. But this does not secure a 'subject'. Rather, it provides the capacities for the decipherment of one's own conscience and consciousness in the process of reading a text. In principle this will be historically and culturally specific, although these notions are not reducible to the 'context' but exist as a 'surface', as described above. Such an approach could thus be duplicated for the more limited terrain of the 'cultural arts' themselves where 'performance' in a more limited and day-to-day sense can be assessed as a certain series of techniques that 'play off' each other across different generic and media forms. In this way performance would not simply fulfil certain pedagogic functions but would also re-activate something other than the text. *Indeed its pedagogic function would be to establish the contours of a 'moral' reading of characters and their predicament and to mobilise a set of differences in the manner in which these can be treated and understood.* The customary, ritualistic, and habitual elements of sociability can then be 'played out' without the resort to classical notions of their representation.

Conclusion

This article began with a claim that performance is a relatively unanalysed element in the discussion of textual processes and then went on to delineate a number of different ways in which it has been generally set up. Despite the seeming variety in this respect the argument has been that the approaches share a central common framework. They are variants of an invariant structure hegemonised by its phenomenological character and the notion of representation ('absent presence') that secure a universalistic and essentialist 'subject'. The purpose of this article has been to unhinge this in a number of ways and to analyse performance, in its post-nineteenth century form, as a surface in which the capacities for habitual interrogation and ethnical dialogue take place in a tension of personalised decipherment. This surface operates as a substitute for the dual concepts 'text and context' and is made up of a series of effects, producing different types of agreement, disagreement and resistance to the normalisation of the reading. The project now becomes one of looking at different performances, their conditions of existence and their implications and effects in the light of these more general remarks.

This article is based upon a talk given to the British Sociological Association's Art and Literature Study Group held at the University of Cardiff in April 1983. Thanks are due to Ian Hunter and Mike Gane, whose communications and conversations benefited the development of a number of the ideas in the article.

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STRIKING CONTRASTS: MEDIA STUDIES AT NORTHERN COLLEGE

BY ANDREW GOODWIN

Media studies in this country has generally been understood as a 'radical' area of the curriculum: *politically*, in its rejection of liberal and pluralist explanations of social legitimation, and *culturally*, in its challenge to Romantic conceptions of culture. It has also been the site of radical *pedagogic* intervention.¹ The assumption behind many recent discussions of media teaching has been that media studies can be a form of social criticism, which – if it does not actually politicise students – can at least throw our politics, ideologies (indeed, our very subjectivities) into crisis.² The following account of media studies teaching at the Northern College is written somewhat against the grain of this debate, as usually understood in journals like *Screen*. This is not because I do not share many of the concerns of radical teachers, but because the teaching situation under review is so unusual. To put the problem crudely, and in simplified form; what do media teachers do when faced with

'radical' students whose very starting point is one of intense criticism of the mass media?

I

Media studies teaching began almost three years ago at Northern College – a residential college, offering a 'second chance to learn' for adults, most of whom have been active in trade unions, voluntary organisations or community groups. The college was established in 1978 and is based at Wentworth Castle, near Barnsley, in the heart of the Yorkshire coalfield. It has deep roots in the labour movement: although financed from a variety of sources, its chief support comes from the four Labour-controlled local authorities of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. Close ties with the trade unions date from its inception, and the Yorkshire Area of the National Union of Mineworkers has played an important part in supporting the College and supplying a steady stream of students. It is not, however, a 'trade union college'. In addition to that central area, courses for community groups, adults returning to study for the first time since leaving school, unemployed groups, women's groups, black organisations, pensioners' groups and so on form a vital part of our work.

¹ See the 'Teaching Film and TV' issue of *Screen*, May/June 1983, vol 24 no 3; and *Screen Education*, 38, Spring 1981.

² This problem was explored in the interesting debate between Judith Williamson, 'How Does Girl Number Twenty Understand Ideology?', *Screen Education* 40, Autumn/Winter 1981/82, pp 80-87, and Ian Connell, 'Progressive Pedagogy?', *Screen*, May/June 1983, vol 24 no 3, pp 50-54.

The College has a policy of 'open access' and runs both Long Courses (of two years duration) and Short Courses (anything between a weekend and five weeks). Teaching methods are student-centred: there is almost no lecturing, and teaching takes place in small groups (ten to fifteen students as a rule) with the emphasis on collective discussion, and in one-to-one tutorials. There are no examinations, but students on the two-year Long Courses are continually assessed and may submit for the award of a College Certificate and Diploma, at the end of the first and second years respectively. The subjects offered vary from course to course, but they range across a wide spectrum of the arts, social sciences and humanities: labour history, trade union studies, women's studies, economics, politics, black studies, sociology, maths, English literature, study skills, creative writing and – since January 1983 – media studies.

Media studies was established as a new area of College work following an award from the British Film Institute.³ Prior to that there had been some initiatives towards a programme of media education, but the BFI award gave the College its chance to develop media studies fully, integrating media education into all areas of College life and establishing a television studio; all with the aim of securing a permanent media studies presence in the College following the termination of BFI funding.

One of the most exciting aspects of this teaching is that the main constituencies served by the College (trade unionists, women and ethnic minorities) are precisely those groups who have so often been poorly served by the media. This is not without its problems and points to the first sense in which media teaching at Northern College is rather unusual: most of our students feel they need little tutoring in the 'constructed' nature of media representations, or the mechanisms of control exercised upon them, since they already perceive the media industries as a source of bias, distortion and lies . . . at least, where their particular group is concerned. It also

needs to be said that the middle period of BFI funding of the post took place against the grim and bitter experience of the 1984-85 coal dispute. Media coverage of the miners inevitably played an important part in the problems and - possibilities of what was still a relatively new area of work for students and many staff in the College.

While it is dangerous to generalise, it would not be unfair to say that generally speaking student attitudes to the media are characterised by the following beliefs: first, the media are *biased* – they offer an inaccurate and distorted view of reality. Second, the media are *powerful* and have been able to influence subordinate social groups sufficiently to blind them to their true interests. Third, the media are *controlled* by the rich and powerful, often in a *conspiratorial* fashion, in order to maintain the *status quo*.

Many readers of *Screen* will no doubt find these positions woefully inadequate, displaying as they do an unsophisticated mixture of epistemological realism and economic determinism, not to mention more than a hint of empiricism. Nonetheless, these attitudes seem to me to be largely well-founded – however inadequately worked through – and they certainly form an exciting starting-point for teaching. But it is a beginning that differs radically from that encountered among most school or college students, undergraduates, or indeed adult or evening class students. (Indeed, I understand it represents a viewpoint now considered rather *passé* in many post-graduate circles.)

It needs also to be said that Northern College students bring these very critical views to an educational environment that critically validates their own *experience*. The principles on which teaching in the College is based are very clear about the need to begin from student *experience* – that difficult, not to say controversial, term. Imagine yourself in front of a class of a dozen or so trade unionists, each of them deeply hostile towards the media, all of them encouraged from Day One to value their own experience, and you begin to get the measure of the problem. Clearly it is a problem intimately linked to the question of the relationship between *experience* and *ideology*. For what we might call the pre-Althusserian school of thought it becomes the tutor's task in this situation to consolidate and build on that opposition to

³ The BFI and the College set up a Steering Committee and later a Support Group which worked very hard to establish and sustain the work. Thanks to Christine Gledhill, Jim Cook, Sylvia Harvey, Trevor Boden, John Corner, Tom Ryall, Jenny Woodley, Gillian Skirrow, Barry Flynn, Ken Granger, Judith Waymont, David Browning, Jean McCrindle and Ruth Schofield.

94 media ideologies. This is the position I lean towards, although I acknowledge it is not without its problems. In contrast there is the school which views *experience* and *ideology* as almost co-terminus; in which case the pedagogic solution is to undermine, challenge and subvert that experience. I have great sympathy with that view, but the problem I have in translating it into a strategy relevant to Northern College is that it seems to assume (rather like the old dominant/negotiated/subordinate 'readings' approach to TV messages) that the students' views (like the TV programmes) are reactionary. But we all know that this is not necessarily the case, particularly in adult and trade union education.

There is, however, one point on which theorists from most schools of thought can generally agree: that we begin from experience in the sense that we take up, rather than ignore, the intellectual agenda that students arrive with. It therefore follows that teaching about the media at Northern College entails an examination of each of the widely held views about media bias, media power and media control outlined above. It also means responding to the demand for practical, useful knowledge, in the shape of skills in using the media effectively.

But of course education can never be about simply responding to a student agenda. There are two important absences there, which seem to me to reflect more general *lacunae*. First, I have yet to encounter a student whose stated aim in coming to the College was to study theories of ideology and hegemony. Fostering a perception that media studies is an area that raises intellectual problems which may require an understanding of some theoretical issues is—as I see it—a central part of my job. Second, students tend to arrive with a very masculine agenda. 'Media studies' can be fairly easily assimilated into this agenda if it is understood as the criticism of TV news coverage of strikes, with perhaps a study of advertising or documentary thrown in. In that context it is the duty of a media tutor to *extend* the sphere of analysis (to include comedy, soap opera, magazines, music, fashion, etc) and to *question* why these areas have been invisible for so long.

My earliest attempt at this second task illustrates something of the atmosphere of the College. In my first term I ran a course on 'The

Politics of Popular Television' and decided to bite on the bullet and include a session on *Coronation Street*. I explained carefully in my introduction to a screening that soap opera should not be classified as a necessarily trivial or conservative form, that it might even harbour progressive or oppositional voices, and that although the representation of everyday life in the show wasn't *realistic*, nonetheless it should be seen as an attempt to re-create a (mythical) sense of community and working-class solidarity. A young student from Accrington put me in my place immediately. No, I was quite wrong about *Coronation Street*, he informed me: the community feeling of the 'Street' wasn't unrealistic at all . . . In fact, it was *exactly* like that in the street where he lived!

II

The nature of the media studies programme offered to Northern College students varies greatly from course to course. Rather than present a list of course titles it might be more useful to outline the main areas of work undertaken at the College over the last three years:

Using the Media. Practical sessions providing experience in dealing with radio and TV interviews, writing press releases and so forth, play a key part in the work. This is especially important for the Short Course programme, where a group of trade unionists or community activists may demand 'useful knowledge' that *will* be used, outside the College, immediately following their attendance.

Media Analysis. Despite the practical slant of much of the work, all media teaching features some element of media analysis. Following Eco, Williamson and others, this is approached as an exercise in de-mystification, helping students to resist meanings, as well as understand their pleasures.⁴ Inevitably, a great deal of this consists of looking at press and broadcasting coverage of trade unions. But it is complemented by analysis of popular cultural forms such as fiction, music and so on.

⁴ Umberto Eco, 'Can Television Teach?', *Screen Education* 31, Summer 1979, pp 15-24; and Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, London, Marion Boyars, 1978.

Understanding and Changing Media Institutions.

We also examine the institutions that produce these texts, with particular reference to the history and structure of broadcasting and the press, and with emphasis on their international context. This work will entail some questioning of the founding principles of these industries – respectively ‘public service broadcasting’ and the ‘freedom of the press’. Not surprisingly, students also want to discuss how these institutions can be reformed, changed, or perhaps overthrown altogether. And so consideration of policy debates forms part of the work – chiefly debates concerning possible options for a labour movement newspaper, and developments in cable and satellite broadcasting.

Media/Cultural Theory. In the early days of media studies at the College it was difficult to introduce theoretical questions explicitly. But now we are broadening the media syllabus to include a wider range of popular forms and a wider selection of recent debates. The main concepts introduced here are ‘ideology’ and ‘culture’; the former approached through debates about social legitimization, the latter via the ‘mass culture’ debate.

Media Production. The College is equipped with a colour TV studio, with post-production edit facilities (using low-band U-Matic), plus black-and-white photographic equipment and broadcast-standard tape recorders for radio production. We have run optional classes on ‘Radio and Television Production’ and now include a production exercise on all the (two-year) long courses. Students are also able to submit a practical media project as part of their assessed work for the College Diploma.

These aspects of media studies are not examined on each and every course. Sometimes the ground covered is extremely limited in scope. On a week-long short course, for instance, media studies might fill only one two-hour slot in total. Often these are linked courses, so it is possible to begin to build across them, but in such cases there are clearly difficult decisions to take. For an activists’ course, such as the one devised for the Sheffield Pensioners’ Action Group, the emphasis is on useful practice – some discussion of images of age in the media, quickly followed by work on writing press releases or dealing with radio/TV interviews. A course for, say, a young Unemployed Workers’ group begins from quite

different premises, and – usually – with a more mixed reaction to the media. Here we would be more likely to concentrate on looking critically at the media, perhaps considering the implications of media coverage of unemployment, with some discussion of an episode of *Boys from the Blackstuff*. For a Return to Study course the aims are different again; we might focus on how TV can be used for study, encouraging a critical usage of TV programmes, and maybe looking at the problems of taking notes from TV.

Other courses have more time: day schools on ‘Trade Unions and the Media’ run for trade unionists in the region, with the help of colleagues in the National Union of Journalists in Barnsley; weekend courses for the Miners’ Wives Support Groups in Barnsley, Doncaster and Derbyshire; and four and five week courses run for the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Here again, practical ‘skills’ are always taught, but we are also able to include more extensive work on media analysis and institutions.

It is only on the long courses that we add work on media theory and production to these elements. On these, students would typically begin with a ten-week course on ‘Culture, Society and the Media’, which looks at competing conceptions of the culture industries and goes on, via student presentations, to examine media representations of social relations. A further ten-week course examines the structure of the British media and follows up with a production exercise.

III

I want now to comment in a little more detail on three areas of this work: media bias; popular culture; and practical work. The ‘media bias’ argument is pervasive throughout many of my discussions – both formal and informal – with students at the College. This was especially so during the 1984/5 coal dispute, and it is to media coverage of that dispute, and the problems raised for my own teaching, that I want initially to turn. I think it is important to say here that the critical attitude held by many of our students stems not from media analysis as such, but rather from their experience of the coverage of disputes and struggles in which they were involved.

96 Indeed, student experience is often more direct than that; it is not unusual during a screening of TV coverage of a particular event to find that someone in the classroom was actually *there*. Not surprisingly, they often claim that the footage is 'distorted', not like the 'real thing'. It is essential to establish at an early stage that 'bias' is not the same thing as error or inaccuracy, and we look at examples of TV news which illustrate this point. It is also important to tackle the argument about editing. Many students feel aggrieved about the way TV footage of picket lines is edited (small wonder, given some of the editing during the coal dispute⁵) and it is essential therefore to pursue the point that all footage (indeed, all *experience*) is edited.

This kind of session would then typically lead into some discussion of the Glasgow University Media Group's work (with emphasis on their non-conspiratorial explanation of 'bias'), coupled perhaps with a screening of the video *Why Their News Is Bad News* (made by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom). Here I usually stress that the group should take notes during the screening, focusing on any weaknesses they can detect in its arguments. (Clearly the programme has many virtues, but it is the *inadequacies* students learn from, since its main argument is one that most of them already hold.)

Wherever possible I follow this work with one or two exercises designed to encourage further questioning of the 'bias' paradigm. First, we might look at some more footage, and I will ask students to take notes, dividing their page in two, with examples of 'bias' on one side and instances of 'balance' on the other. The responses to this, in looking at TV coverage of the coal dispute, have been very interesting indeed. The Miners' Wives Support Groups (our only all-women classes) seem able to enter into the spirit of this exercise and generally elaborate very fully on the examples of 'balance' and 'impartiality'. Mixed groups, which do tend to be dominated very markedly by the men, clearly have a problem with this task. 'You're making me feel like a liberal', a (male) student once complained. In the mixed groups students seem to see the exercise as primarily one of class betrayal, and resist it by

citing instances of 'bias' whenever we move into any serious discussion of contrary examples. I can only speculate on the reasons for this difference, which points, I believe, to a contradictory phenomenon. There is pretty clearly a gender factor at work here; it is tempting to see the women as inherently more open, less dogmatic than many male students, and able to express this openness more effectively when the men are not present to dominate the session. But this would only be half the story, since the other missing variable is years of trade union activity and education. That the miners' wives are the only group I have taught who are both radicalised in their attitudes to the media, and extremely open to challenges to those views, speaks volumes about the damaging anti-intellectualism within trade unions that has – fortunately – passed them by.

A second activity is designed to bring the group's attention to the formal conventions of news presentation, an element that is hard to find a purchase on using content analysis. Here we read an example of the 'New Journalism', a story by Nicholas Tomalin (originally published in the *Times*) called 'The General Goes Zapping Charlie Cong', a savage report about an American general in the Vietnam war. It is stressed that this is a factual report, not fiction, and students are asked to note the differences between this example of the 'New Journalism' and conventional news writing. In this way it is possible to begin focusing student attention upon the *formal* devices of news and the limitations of content analysis.⁶

But teaching about news coverage of the coal dispute has not been easy, for two reasons. First, it is evident that this was not a story that saw the media exercising their relatively autonomous muscles with much verve or enthusiasm. Frankly, it has to be said that even if that embarrassing word 'bias' is avoided, the media *did* often distort the truth, rarely portrayed the dispute from the point of view of the strikers, and failed on countless occasions to maintain 'balance'.⁷ I made a point of reading the popular press during the strike, and so did some

⁵ See, for instance, Len Masterman's account of the 'Battle of Orgreave' in Len Masterman (ed), *TV Mythologies*, London, Comedia, 1985.

⁶ A more detailed outline of this exercise, including the Tomalin article reproduced in full, is available in Andrew Goodwin, *Teaching TV Drama-Documentary* (BFI Education, 1985).

students – one enterprising miner kept a library of cuttings for future reference (which we later used as the basis for a small exhibition on the subject). ‘Bias’ may be a rather naïve term epistemologically speaking, but it is pretty damn close to what the *Sun* and the rest of the Fleet Street populars were up to during that dispute.

Broadcasting, of course, is a different matter. Towards the end of the strike some of our students went to the nearby pit village of Grimethorpe to talk to miners and their families about the media coverage: their condemnation of the media was only matched by their consistent praise for Channel Four’s evening news. Indeed, even the President of the NUM seemed to concede that the media weren’t *all* bad.⁸ But if ‘bias’ is not the right word for TV and radio coverage of the dispute, then the constant stress on the themes of picket-line violence and the ‘return to work’ were hardly shining examples of ‘impartiality’. It would have been an absurdity to teach against the grain of student attitudes and experience here, when these arguments were so clearly well-founded. The argument that the media *were* impartial (or, indeed, *favoured* the NUM⁹) did not even provoke productive anger – it was a source of enormous mirth to most of our students.

I have tried to teach about the dispute by looking at the significance of *news values* (which help to explain the prominence of violent images) and *narrative* (which helps to explain the obsession with the resolution of the story – the ‘return to work’). And, inevitably, that first area of investigation leads us into the second major difficulty in teaching critically about the dispute – the NUM’s own dealings with the media.¹⁰ There is no space here to examine this, but one of our problems during the dispute was that many students, understandably perhaps, took up

a defensive position if the union was criticised. My teaching here was hampered also by a lack of teaching materials. Research on policy debates, trade union communications and labour movement news management has been seriously neglected. My own work is generally restricted to class discussion of trade union journals – a small beginning, but hardly adequate to the difficult issues raised by the NUM’s response to the media during the strike.¹¹

There are many similarities between the problem of teaching about the coal dispute and the issues raised by the Falklands War. I ran a course at the College on ‘The British Media and the Falklands War’ on two occasions; we looked at the production of news, TV and press coverage of the war, the question of censorship and bias, images of race and gender, and finished with a session on media representations of the Special Air Services.¹² It was certainly one of the most popular courses I have ever taught. And that bothered me. My concern throughout was to marginalise the issue of censorship, use the war as a case study of real conflict between the media and the state and as a fruitful basis for criticism of the ‘bias’ paradigm. (The Glasgow Group’s position is vulnerable here, since it posits that control is exercised primarily through the class and professional ideologies of media workers; during the Falklands War it was evident that this process was often superseded by direct state censorship.) However, the course review on each occasion heaped praise on the course, and seemed to suggest that what students had got from the sessions was simply further ammunition for their attacks on media bias and censorship. As soon as media studies was established with some credibility among the students we dropped the course and set off down less popular avenues.

The study of ‘popular culture’ remains,

⁷ The fullest account so far is offered in the excellent pamphlet by David Jones, Julian Petley, Mike Power and Lesley Wood, *Media Hits The Pits: The Media and the Coal Dispute*, London, Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom, 1985. An earlier critique is provided by Bill Schwarz and Alan Fountain, ‘The Role of the Media’, in Huw Beynon (ed), *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miners’ Strike*, London, Verso, 1985.

⁸ See Arthur Scargill’s comments during the debate at the 1984 Edinburgh International Television Festival, reproduced in ‘Scargill Takes On The Telly Men’, *New Socialist*, October 1984.

⁹ See the argument of Alistair Hetherington, cited in *ibid*.

¹⁰ Michael Crick’s *Scargill and the Miners*, London, Penguin, 1985, contains many interesting comments on the NUM’s relations with the media. Patrick Wintour offers a more explicit critique in ‘The Lamp the Miners Failed to Light’, *Guardian*, May 20, 1985. A left response is supplied by Mandy Merck, ‘Speak Nicely To The Media’, *New Statesman*, May 31, 1985.

¹¹ Tony Grace offers a useful survey of this area in ‘The Trade Union Press in Britain’, *Media, Culture & Society*, April 1985, vol 7, no 2.

¹² See Richard Paterson and Philip Schlesinger, ‘State Heroes for the Eighties’, *Screen*, May/June 1983, vol 24 no 3, pp 55-72.

ironically, one of these less popular intellectual pursuits. Many students certainly consider it to be a rather trivial one. And here, again, I must note an important difference between teaching in Northern College and more familiar cultural studies territory. The latter will commonly take students through a Grand Tour of aesthetic theory (Plato to structuralism, via Kant) or elite cultural theory (Arnold-Eliot-Leavis and after), on the assumption, presumably, that most students arrive with idealist and elitist conceptions of culture. This is not quite true for our students. You do not lead a shipyard worker with twenty years of trade unionism behind him gently away from bourgeois cultural attitudes and towards an appreciation of trade union banners. But if our students are refreshingly devoid of idealist assumptions about culture, this only leads to a different problem, which is a rather reductionist approach in which all signification is explained in terms of (usually, class) social relations. In the early days at the College, as media studies fought for a serious, central place in the life and work there, I studiously avoided any attempt to marginalise it as a 'cultural' or 'arts appreciation' sphere of activity. I now wonder whether we don't need to fly in the face of fashion and run a Film/Arts Appreciation course, because the developing 'cultural studies' paradigm, which increasingly has eschewed all questions of aesthetic value or non-socially specific material determination, is too easily recuperated for a crude reductionism.

But there is a sense, of course, in which the developing work on 'popular culture' takes on many student preconceptions. While student experience *has* fostered a healthy scepticism towards idealist views of culture, it is often unredeemingly elitist with regard to popular entertainment forms. Judith Williamson put the problem succinctly some time ago in *Screen Education*:

In this class [a group of young Media and Communication students] we studied TV and newspapers, again I was doing the standard work (including history of broadcasting and the press) but they thought people who watched Coronation Street or Crossroads must be dumb, and assumed that the ignorance of the masses is proved rather than perhaps encouraged, by their readership of the Sun, Star and Mirror. I can't say too often, it is not enough just to analyse the media. Students

*can know the history of TV backwards and 'deconstruct' an entire TV programme but still think the people who watch it are stupid.*¹³

Certainly Northern College students would see this slightly differently; the mass media *would* be seen as part of the problem in encouraging 'stupidity', false consciousness, and so on. But the difficult task of trying to engender respect, as opposed to contempt, for popular forms, corresponds quite closely, I would imagine, with the problems encountered by media teachers elsewhere. I am not sure how to implement Williamson's 'solution', since I don't share her taste for confrontationalist styles of teaching (and, in any case, her account suggests that her rather angry strategy was exceptional rather than normal). I agree with her formulation in principle: 'Unless you can find any analogous situation in their own experience, and make it problematic for them – they will never really grasp the ideological relation between "text" and "reader".' For the men it's often interesting to pose the question of whether or not people who spend their evenings drinking in the pub, or playing football, are dupes of international capitalism, but I can't say that the argument that ensues is ever really fully satisfactory in exposing the elitist and masculinist bias against popular entertainment.

Much of our work in this area has been on soap opera, or what some now term 'melodrama'. I include some work on either *Coronation Street* or *Dallas* (sometimes both) on each of our two-year courses. Objections to this work take two forms. First, it is suggested that popular television is too trivial to merit consideration; it is an 'escapist' fantasy unfit for serious discussion. This objection is, in my experience at the College, fairly easily overcome. The mere inclusion of these forms in an educational context begins to shift many students towards thinking more seriously about them; and it isn't difficult, in class discussion, to point to the more obvious aspects of class, gender and (sometimes) race in the programmes themselves. This is an area where disagreement among the group is almost certain to occur, because a few students (usually, but not exclusively, women) will 'come

¹³ Judith Williamson, 'How Does Girl Number Twenty Understand Ideology?', op cit, p 84.

out' as fans of a particular show and take up the debate. (If they don't, I cause consternation in the class by owning up to a penchant for *Dallas*.)

The second objection to the study of popular television is more troublesome; perhaps these programmes do deal with 'real issues', it will be argued, but they do so in a reactionary fashion designed to mask the real political issues. Why is Alf Roberts in *Coronation Street* an Independent councillor and not a Labour Party man? Why is everyone in the street a petit-bourgeois, self-employed home-owner? Why doesn't soap deal with unemployment? Doesn't *Dallas* merely celebrate the American Dream? The problem here, for me, is that there is clearly a great deal of sense behind these formulations.

The notion that *Dallas* or *Coronation Street* or *Crossroads* are 'progressive texts' or feminist texts is patently absurd. Granada TV set the teaching of popular TV back ten years when they introduced a scab ('Henry Wakefield') as a sympathetic character in *Coronation Street* at the height of the picket-line violence during the coal strike. This, the students disclosed, was the *proof* of the soap opera conspiracy. It is, of course, no such thing; but Granada's astonishing intervention in the dispute (intentional or otherwise) must have dented the considerable trendy left confidence in the show's progressive powers. It certainly had me wondering if I shouldn't take the easy option and teach about *Brookside* instead. Then I saw the graffiti on a wall outside Grimethorpe colliery: there, alongside the names of the 'Scab Bastards' scrawled in white paint, a member of the cultural resistance had added – 'H. Wakefield'.

The problem of student 'readings' and 'decodings' in an environment that places so much stress on experience is at its most troublesome in the area of popular culture, because it is here that this experience is, generally speaking, least advanced. In the attempt to confront student prejudice against popular TV I often feel trapped in a cultural relativism. We establish very quickly that it is possible to make a number of different 'readings' of these programmes. But having warmed to the polysemic nature of cultural texts most students are then quite content to let me luxuriate in the belief that *Dallas* exposes the corrupt, amoral nature of modern capitalism (isn't that why Norman Tebbit doesn't like it?)... just so long

as *they* can cling to *their* reading of the show as a capitalist conspiracy against the international proletariat.

One, textual, tactic is to point to the social pleasures afforded by popular TV; I will often introduce a session using Richard Dyer's work on Utopias and on one occasion we did stage a rather successful 'debate', in which I argued Dyer's position, in a slightly exaggerated form (none of the students would take this on) and a member of the group presented her own critique of the 'culture industries', based on Adorno and Horkheimer's famous essay.¹⁴

In most cases, student resistance to popular forms is entrenched; screenings of soap opera, or comedy shows, or pop videos, followed by discussion have rarely, in my experience, led to any serious re-evaluation of a particular individual's 'reading'. That, you see, is their own *experience*, and the teacher cannot dictate what the text 'means'. This difficulty can take extreme forms: I speak as a tutor often faced with the argument that *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* is a reactionary text because it introduces humour into the serious business of class struggle and therefore belittles suffering and oppression. That is not to say that we haven't succeeded in putting popular forms on the agenda. It is noticeable that students are increasingly opting for essay titles outside the news/current affairs area; this year there have been extended essays on soap opera, women's magazines and pop music. These may be familiar areas at the Open University, but at Northern College they have raised some eyebrows, and the (male) student working on soaps has had to endure more than his fair share of 'pillocking'.

My non-textual 'solution' (such as it is) to students' dismissive attitude towards popular forms is to direct their attention away from the TV set and towards the history of broadcasting – especially that formative moment in the mid-'50s, which looks so familiar 30 years later. During our work on the development of British broadcasting we look at the ethos of 'public service broadcasting' and its opponents (in the

¹⁴ See Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in Rick Altman (ed), *Genre: The Musical*, London, BFI and Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment: The Culture Industries', in James Curran et al (eds), *Mass Communication and Society*, London, Arnold, 1977.

'50s and the '80s) of the *laissez-faire* school. This never occurs without an embarrassed shuffling in the classroom as the more dogmatic comrades recognise their own paternalism in the shape of one Lord Reith. This can lead us into some *genuine* discussion of the notion that the public do not know what is good for them. And it is here, rather than on the terrain of individual 'readings', that real argument and debate about the 'popular' takes place. (Of course, this doesn't have to be done historically. A group exercise loosely based on the deliberations of the Peacock Committee would also serve this purpose.)

Media production at the College takes place chiefly in the medium of video, although there is also work in radio and photography. There are four objectives behind this work. First, we seek to offer training in production skills. Second, video in particular has an important publishing function, helping to make students' work available publicly, outside the College. For instance: one of our students had written an extended essay on George Orwell's visit to Barnsley in the '30s and used the audio interviews from his research to make a radio programme which was subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio Sheffield. Two students on Trade Union Studies wanted to research and write about the dangers of asbestos; but they also wanted to publicise its hazards at meetings – so they made a video ('Asbestos – A Killer By Any Standard?') and submitted it as part of their assessed Diploma work. A group on this year's Social and Community Studies course undertook a group project on the effects of the coal dispute in Grimethorpe. The best way they could attract local interest in the project was to make a video about the subject.

A third objective of this work is the promotion of media/visual 'literacy'. On two-year courses I have increasingly shifted away from classroom-based text analysis and towards production exercises as a means of teaching *critical* skills. After a couple of production sessions most students begin to complain that they can no longer watch TV/cinema without looking for edits, 'reverses' and thinking about the relation between sound and vision, and so on. It would be difficult to introduce semiotic or linguistic approaches to the media in our courses – this production work seems often to be a good substitute for that kind of textual analysis.

Fourthly, I am also trying to teach about *professionalism*. And that doesn't only mean criticising professional practices. Once again, student perceptions at Northern College confound common pedagogic tactics. Criticism of naturalistic modes of editing, hierarchical divisions of labour and so on form a part of this input into media production. But it has also been important to point to the *necessarily* constructed nature of media texts (as an antidote to the argument that *all* editing is somehow illegitimate) and to raise questions about the class/political position of media workers. It is partly for this reason that we have tried to involve media workers – from Steel Bank Films in Sheffield, Trade Films, the Birmingham Trade Union Resources Centre, the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and the BBC. Screenings and speakers from these and other groups have been extremely important for us – because many of the students come with a view that 'progressive' media production is a contradiction in terms.

There is a tension between my own pedagogic objectives and the 'publishing' function that is so central to student interest in production work. Major productions – such as the Asbestos and the Grimethorpe videos – have quickly tended to be swamped by the demands of time and scarce resources. And while the production process itself has been organised collectively, and with a considerable degree of sharing of skills, the programmes have tended to be formally conservative. The Asbestos video, for instance, consists mainly of talking heads, studio presenters, and illustrative still and video images with a student narration. The programme does break with this format at one point (where a montage sequence of photographs, captions, newspaper headlines and music is presented) but the dominant conventions throughout are that of broadcast TV current affairs.

This conservatism in production language is only partly due to a shortage of time, although clearly it is the case that in a tight spot it is easier to copy conventional media discourses. Students also feel that their audiences would be *alienated* by unconventional techniques; they are generally unmoved by the formalist/structuralist argument that this is in fact a desirable response! Encouragement to use jump-cuts, for example, is often met with the objection that the audience

will see the 'revealed' edit as a 'mistake', denying the student production the credibility that would be given to broadcast TV.

Clearly there are advantages in producing for a 'real' audience, and students certainly get a great deal of satisfaction from projects that yield a finished product. As an exercise in the demystification of professional expertise they have demonstrated that the techniques of broadcast journalism are not difficult to learn and reproduce. But this is a gain at some educational cost.¹⁵ Two more recent courses at the College have, I believe, married production and critical analysis more successfully. On a class on 'Trade Unions and the Media' we began with a series of fairly standard sessions on news and industrial relations, moving on to practical work. In the latter half of the course the groups produced a short video for trade unionists on 'Using The Media'. But the group felt that to approach this without also presenting a critique of media practices was implicitly to lay the 'blame' at the door of trade unions and their 'failure' to deal with the media effectively. So the first half of the programme presents an analysis of media coverage of unions, while the second section gives advice on how to handle the media – with dramatised sequences on how and how *not* to be interviewed. This project had the advantage of drawing attention to media analysis, simply by making media studies the *content* of the programme.¹⁶

In my view our most successful practical project was an exercise in the 'The Mass Media In Britain' course on advertising, beginning with two sessions spent analysing and discussing attitudes to ads, mainly from magazines. The groups were then asked to produce a series of video advertisements for campaigns/causes/events/groups they wished to promote. Because the duration of the piece was so limited (between 45 and 90 seconds) the crucial questions about

how and why images are used came to the fore. One of the ads (promoting the anti-apartheid movement and a boycott of South African goods) was made in a style reminiscent of a pop video. Another used images from cosmetics advertisements intercut with stills of animal experiments to make an ad for animal rights. Of course, there remains a sense in which these are still 'simulations', since the groups are copying advertisements; but the extremely condensed nature of the form provoked a far greater awareness of the mediating role of video than had previous production projects.

IV

Our goal in bringing media studies to the Northern College has been simultaneously to establish it as an activity of *practical use* and *intellectual difficulty*. I am not trying here to make the unhelpful distinction between 'theory' and 'practice' – quite the opposite, in fact, since it has been important to demonstrate that media analysis is of practical use, and that 'practical' (i.e. production) work raises theoretical and intellectual problems. Negotiating the problems and possibilities of the two elements of media studies is never easy; in an environment like Northern College the difficulties are compounded by the very real danger that student experience will simply be reinforced.

My difficulty lies in knowing how to develop an alternative practice. Attempts to confront student experience head-on seem to me to harbour two dangers. First, there is the very real problem (especially on our two-year courses) that student confidence could be totally undermined. Our job as teachers is to be critical, to ask awkward questions, challenge assumptions and so on; but this should not amount to a form of intellectual assault. Fortunately, there is a second problem with this strategy, which is student *resistance* – especially in adult education. Sessions which attempt to take on student experience in a confrontational manner are responded to in kind; the shouting match that often results is not, in my experience, a productive educational atmosphere and has bad consequences for the women in the group. Adult students are quite skilful at resisting tutor-led teaching, especially where they have been encouraged to work as a collective unit.

¹⁵ See Bob Ferguson, 'Practical Work and Pedagogy', *Screen Education* 38, Spring 1981, pp 41-55; Manuel Alvarado, 'Simulation as Method', *Screen Education* 14, Spring 1975, pp 21-28.

¹⁶ John Tulloch offers a different way of working with trade unionists on practical projects, in 'Television, Trade Unions and Media Studies', *Screen Education* 38, Spring 1981, pp 68-79. See also Andrew Goodwin and John Field, 'Teaching The Media To Trade Unionists', *Industrial Tutor*, Autumn 1985, vol 4 no 2.

102 Too many partial accounts of media teaching attempt to draw enormous and over-reaching conclusions from limited experience. In the context of Northern College it would be particularly foolhardy to prescribe remedies; the teaching situation is unusual and tells us more, I feel, about the assumptions behind previous approaches to media pedagogics than it does about what teachers in quite different situations should be doing. What is clear is that there is in adult, trade union and community education an enormous degree of interest in the critical study of the mass media. Much of this stems from a sense that the media are to blame for the current difficulties of the left/labour movement, but it comes also from other directions; from adults involved in community media projects, from interest in the aesthetic/appreciative aspect of film and television, from amateur photographers, and from working people eager to preserve their past via 'oral history' projects using audio, and sometimes video. Over the last three years student interest in the field has snowballed, due in part no doubt to the role played by the media during the coal dispute. This year, on the Trade Union Studies course, students' end of year extended essays were divided into three categories – labour history, politics . . . and media studies.

But if the demand is there, I am not at all sure that we are in a fit state to respond. Media studies may have been constructed as a 'radical' space in the curriculum, but research and teaching in the field has often taken place at considerable distance from the concerns of trade unionists and community activists. With the exception of the Glasgow Media Group's work, attention to media representations of the working-class and its organisations remains massively underdeveloped. That founding text of cultural studies – Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* – has been repeatedly criticised for its neglect of the collective and cultural institutions of working people: and yet the absences remain, nearly 30 years later.

There is an urgent need for us to develop teaching materials relevant to working-class adults, trade unionists, community workers, pensioners and the unemployed. In trade union education, for instance, it has now become commonplace to include elements of media education – usually in the form of an uncritical tour through Denis MacShane and the Glasgow

Media Group.¹⁷ These are fine starting points, but they remain limited, and are often taught in an environment devoid of any 'cultural studies' input. MacShane's *Using The Media* is often taught by professional journalists, who are brought in to 'grill' the student victims and then lambast them for the inadequacies of their interview performance. Not the most progressive of teaching strategies, and one which implies that the 'problem' lies with rank-and-file trade unionists and their inability to 'deal with' a simulated Sir Robin Day. The Glasgow Group's work has become rather unfashionable in some academic circles, yet its substance remains of enormous importance for media studies. However, they are certainly not without their critics; the problem is that most trade union educators are unaware of this.

The British Film Institute's commitment to adult education in funding the Northern College post has, I believe, been vindicated many times over. Hundreds of students have now attended media studies classes at the College, and there is clearly more interest in the subject than we can meet. My own experience of arriving at the College from the Polytechnic of Central London's School of Communication and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (apart from profound culture shock) was a discovery that the 'radical' research undertaken in media and cultural studies over the last ten years or so really *was* useful. It should no longer be possible for adult and trade union educators to restrict 'media studies' to press content analysis, media 'bias', ownership and control and 'interview techniques'. Cultural studies has put new areas and approaches on the agenda and these have been profoundly important in providing a base for a *critical* educational practice. But if this process is not to be a one-way street we must work harder to make media studies more accessible and relevant to working-class adults.

¹⁷ Denis MacShane's *Using The Media*, London, Pluto Press, 1979, remains the most useful and widely read introduction to 'handling the media' techniques. But see also Jane Drinkwater's *Get It On*, London, Pluto Press, 1984, which – for tutors based in London – has more detail on the London media.

Since this article was completed, the post of Tutor in Media Studies has been permanently established at Northern College.

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